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Hierarchies and Dependency as a Narrative Legitimation Strategy for Female Leadership in an Islamist Framework: A Case-Study of Zainab al-Ghazali's Prison Memoirs

1 Introduction: Forms of Dependency in *Ayyām min ḥayyātī*

This paper¹ aims to analyse how forms of dependency are narrated in Zainab al-Ghazali's prison memoirs *Ayyām min ḥayyātī*² with a focus on the interplay of dependencies and gender in the text. It will be shown how al-Ghazali uses hierarchies and dependency as a strategy in her narrative to legitimize her role as a female leader in an Islamist framework, where the primary purpose of women is to be wives and mothers and not necessarily political leaders, like Zainab was.

Zainab al-Ghazali (1917–2005) was an Islamist activist and famous member of the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwān al-muslimīn*). She published her memoirs in 1977 in Cairo, in which she mainly recounts her political activism before as well as during her imprisonment in the torture prison of Gamal Abdel Nasser, who ruled Egypt from 1952 to 1970.

There are several distinct layers and forms of dependency inside and in the context of the text, starting with Zainab's strong physical dependency as a prisoner on the guards. With regards to gender, there is the dependency between husband and wife, in which the wife, according to Islamist ideas, must be subordinate to the husband, who is the head and breadwinner of the family. Another form of dependency,

1 This paper was written in the context of the “Narratives of Dependency” conference hosted by the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS) on June 15 and 16, 2021. I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank the organizers Prof. Marion Gymnich and Prof. Elke Brüggen for the chance to participate in the conference. I would also like to thank Prof. Christine Schirrmacher, in whose seminar on the Muslim Brotherhood the idea for this article originated, and my dear colleague Dr. Anna Kollatz for her helpful corrections and advice. My greatest thanks go to Prof. Stephan Conermann, through whom I was given the opportunity to participate in the Narratology Working Group preparing for the conference in the first place and who gave me great encouragement to give a talk myself.

2 *Ayyām min ḥayyātī* literally means “Days of my Life”. The English publication was named “Return of the Pharaoh”, which refers to the key role of Gamal Abdel Nasser, under whose rule Zainab was imprisoned. In this paper the following English translation will be cited: Zainab al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh: Memoir in Nasir's Prison*, trans. Mokrane Guezzo (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2006).

which results from Zainab's membership in the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the hierarchical structure of this organization, is her dependency on the (male) leaders of the MB. Finally, there is Zainab's dependency as a believer on God, the almighty creator. Thereby, total devotion to God creates a relationship between God and the believer, which, from the perspective of the believers, is indeed characterized by strong asymmetrical dependency. To leave this relationship would not only mean losing certain material resources provided by the network of believers, but also the loss of eternal life, which is the most precious thing a human can possess, according to Zainab's beliefs. Even if we leave the ideological framework in which Zainab operates, we face institutions in Egyptian jurisprudence which label conversion from Islam or renunciation as apostasy. This can be legally punished or simply not recognized, not to mention the social discrimination faced by people confronted with such charges.³

While the first two forms of dependency (on the guards/on the husband and gender rules) are perceived as worldly and finite by Zainab, the latter two (on the leaders of the MB/on God) are described as spiritual and eternal. So, with regard to the title of this paper and the question of the legitimation of female leadership within an Islamist framework, it will be argued that Zainab draws upon these 'spiritual' dependencies in her narrative to overcome the 'worldly' ones. This means her submission to the Islamist ideology and network and finally to God himself enables Zainab to overcome not only her physical dependency on the guards and torturers in prison, but also the gender-based rules and hierarchies between man and woman or wife and husband – and thus functions as a narrative legitimation strategy for female leadership.

In the first part of this paper, some background information about Zainab and about the 'Islamist framework', in which Zainab's narrative can be situated, will be presented. In this context, the role women are supposed to play within the ideology of the MB will be briefly sketched to highlight where Zainab oversteps this role in her writings. In a next step, some general information about the text and its narrative structure will be given with emphasis on the question how Zainab presents herself as a political and spiritual leader in her narrative and thereby establishes a contrast to the Islamist ideal of femininity. In the fourth section, different narrative strategies will be explored which Zainab uses to reintegrate into the Islamist ideal of womanhood. Consequently, in section five I will argue that certain hierarchies, which Zainab perceives as divine and thereby irrevocable, and finally her total dependency on God himself, can be considered her strongest and most effective narrative strategy to legitimize overstepping gender-based hierarchies and rules.

³ See for example the Report of Freedom House on apostasy laws in Egypt: Freedom House, ed., "Policing Belief: The Impact of Blasphemy Laws on Human Rights," Freedom House Online, n.d. https://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/PolicingBelief_Egypt.pdf [accessed 03.09.2021].

2 Contextualization: Zainab al-Ghazali and the Muslim Brotherhood

Zainab al-Ghazali was born in Egypt in 1917 and died in 2005. She referred to herself as the “mother of the Muslim Brotherhood”⁴ and was the founder and leader of the independent women’s organization “Muslim Ladies Association” (*jāmi’a al-saiyydāt al-muslimīn*). In the 1950s, she became one of the leading figures in the Muslim Brotherhood and organized its underground activities when most of the male leaders were imprisoned. Later in her life she also became the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood’s ladies branch.⁵ Until today Zainab is worshiped by the members of the organization for being a *mujāhida*, a fighter in *jihad*, which in this context refers to the political struggle for a *sharī’a*-based theocracy.⁶ On social media channels like YouTube numerous videos can be found that celebrate her as an idol for Muslim women.⁷ In this regard, Zainab al-Ghazali was a quite outstanding figure in Islamist circles,⁸ who are typically male-dominated.

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928 by Hasan al-Bannā (1906–1949), some years after Egypt had gained – at least officially – independence from the British colonial power in 1922.⁹ The organization proposed a model of society based on Is-

4 Valerie J. Hoffman, “An Islamic Activist: Zainab al-Ghazali,” in *Women and the Family in the Middle East: New Voices of Change*, ed. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985): 232.

5 The Muslim Sisters Group (*qism al-aḥawāt al-muslimāt*) was founded in 1932. For further information on its emergence and development, see Omayya Abdel-Latif, “In the Shadow of the Brothers: The Women of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood,” *Carnegie Papers* 13 (2008): 1–23. For the Muslim Sisters’ role in contemporary politics, see Erika Biagini, “The Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood between Violence, Activism and Leadership,” *Mediterranean Politics* 22, no. 1 (2017): 35–53.

6 For a further analysis of the Muslim Brotherhood’s interpretation of the qur’anic concept of *jihād* and its evolution, see for example Ran A. Levy, “The Idea of Jihād and its Evolution: Ḥasan al-Bannā and the Society of the Muslim Brothers,” *Die Welt des Islams* 54 (2014): 139–58. It must be mentioned, though, that the interpretation of *jihād* as an armed struggle against secular governance and unbelievers is limited to militant Islamist circles, whereas the majority of Muslims reject this interpretation. For further exploration of the term’s qur’anic origin, see Ella Landau-Tasseron, “Jihād,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Washington: Brill, 2003), http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_00101.

7 See for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHISZWdDc6Y>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_dM4WCJHoc; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-j7TknrihUM>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXHhX2zCjI0> [all accessed 20.08.2021].

8 For a further definition of the terms “Islamist” and “Islamism”, see for example Andreas Meier, *Politische Strömungen im Modernen Islam* (Wuppertal: Peter Hammer Verlag, 2002): 73–74.

9 Although Egypt had officially achieved independence in 1922 and was henceforth, at least on paper, no longer a British protectorate but a sovereign state, Great Britain continued to exert considerable influence on the country’s domestic and foreign policy. Independence was granted to Egypt only under restrictions, and Great Britain had stipulated four conditions in the declaration in which it recognized Egypt’s independence: (1) securing Britain’s communications networks in Egypt; (2) the British

lamic law, the *sharī'a*, to overcome foreign domination and thus become an independent, prosperous nation. To achieve this goal, the nation had to return to the ideals of 'true' Islam and prepare for a final overthrow of secular governance.¹⁰ To spread true Islamic values among the people, the Muslim Brotherhood strongly focused on welfare activities and propagandistic work on a grass-roots level. They built schools and hospitals and went to the villages and coffeehouses to preach.¹¹ From its founding in the 1920s until today, the organization has undergone several ideological shifts and changes depending on the political situation in the country. Its orientation reached from a very radical and militant stance toward secular governance in the late 1950s and 60s (when the Nasser government decimated the MB through extensive persecution) to a more moderate and liberal orientation in the 1970s. Furthermore, during the Arab revolutions of 2011 the MB won the elections as the organization was willing to cooperate within the democratic institutions.¹²

Women serve an important function in the Islamist worldview as biological reproducers and educators of the new generation, who have to rebuild the Islamic nation.¹³ According to an article by Hasan al-Bannā from 1936, a woman reaches perfection if she is "a girl of innocent chastity, of superior intelligence and fine sensitivity" and "if she honours the goal and the mission".¹⁴ The greatest perfection she can attain is to be a supportive wife and a caring mother, who teaches her sons about true Islam and

defense of Egypt against all foreign aggression or interference; (3) the protection of foreign interests in Egypt as well as the protection of minorities; (4) the British (military) presence in and control over Sudan. For a brief history of the political situation at that time, see Malcolm Yapp, *The Near East since the First World War: A History to 1995* (London: Routledge, 1996): 51–68.

10 Cf. Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013): 20–26.

11 Brynjar Lia, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt: The Rise of an Islamic Mass Movement, 1928–1942* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1998): 35.

12 After the military coup in 2013, the Brotherhood, which over time evolved into an international movement with branches in Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Algeria and Libya, was classified as a terrorist organization in Egypt and prosecuted by the state. For a detailed analysis of the organization's development and history, see Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood*.

13 The roles of women as biological reproducers and educators in Islamist movements have already been studied with respect to the example of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, for example by Haleh Afshar, "Women and Reproduction in Iran," in *Woman-Nation-State*, ed. Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias (London: Macmillan, 1989): 110–26. In a broader context, including national movements in countries and cultures dominated by Islam, the role of women has been explored in manifold case studies in Deniz Kandiyoti, ed., *Women, Islam and the State* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

14 Hasan al-Bannā, "al-Mar'a al-muslima 'ala mufrāq ṭarīqayn" (1936), published on the Muslim Brotherhood's Online Archive "Ikhwan-Wiki": https://www.ikhwanwiki.com/index.php?title=%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A3%D8%A9_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A9_%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89_%D9%85%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%82_%D8%B7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%86 [accessed 01.09.2021].

their mission to build the Islamic nation.¹⁵ Although al-Bannā adopted a conservative view of the limits of women's political activism, there were situations where he encouraged the Muslim Sisters to participate in street protests, like in 1948, after the dissolution of the MB. However, the Muslim Sisters of those times mainly engaged in charity work and social activities like founding schools and medical services.¹⁶

Zainab Al-Ghazali did not start her political activism in the brotherhood, but founded an organization herself, which was called the "Society of Muslim Ladies" (*jāmi'a al-saiyydāt al-muslimīn*). It was founded by her in 1936, when she was only 18 years old, and stayed independent from the Muslim Brotherhood. This founding was also a result of a brief mingling with secularly oriented feminists, who Zainab criticized for their inclination towards western feminism.¹⁷ In her view, western feminist ideology was hostile to Islamic ideals and therefore harmed the development of the country by destroying its native culture and exposing it to foreign cultural domination:

Our goal was to acquaint the Muslim woman with her religion so she would be convinced by the means of study that the women's liberation movement is a deviant innovation that occurred due to the Muslims' backwardness.¹⁸

In Al-Ghazali's view, Islam has provided women with all the rights they need and, therefore, the bad situation of women results from the absence of 'true' Islam, which must be implemented to achieve progress for women. For Zainab, the reintroduction of 'Islamic women's rights' is an integral part of the building of the "Islamic nation".¹⁹ She engaged in women's right to education and reforms in marriage and divorce laws and based her argumentation on religious sources. According to her memoirs, she even con-

¹⁵ Hasan al-Bannā, "al-Mar'a al-muslima 'ala mufrāq ṭariqayn". A further introduction into Hasan al-Bannā's life, thoughts and writings can be found for example in Gudrun Kraemer, *Hasan al-Bannā* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010).

¹⁶ Abdel-Latif, "In the Shadow": 3. With the ideological changes over time, the MB's stance towards women changed too, and today the female members play a significantly more active role than they did in the early decades, as Erika Biagini has shown (Biagini, *The Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood*). But since Zainab al-Ghazali belongs to the older generation, who was mainly influenced by the teachings of the founder Hasan al-Bannā, and her narrative takes place in the late 1950s and 1960s, in other words during a phase of militant radicalization, the female ideal of the early decades will be taken as a starting point for this paper's narratological analysis. Although the field of women's participation has widened, the primacy of motherhood has not changed, however, and can be seen as a consensus among Islamist groups.

¹⁷ Cf. Jeffrey Halverson and Amy Way, "Islamist Feminism: Constructing Gender Identities in Postcolonial Muslim Societies," *Politics and Religion* 4 (2011): 513.

¹⁸ Zainab al-Ghazali interviewed by Valerie J. Hoffman (Hoffman, "An Islamic Activist": 235).

¹⁹ Hoffman, "An Islamic Activist": 235.

sulted the Saudi grand mufti on women questions.²⁰ She also engaged in the male-dominated genre of *tafsir*, Qur'ān exegesis, and wrote her own Qur'ān comment.²¹

Zainab was clearly in line with the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology. Despite her fight for women's education and emphasis on the equal value of men and women, in her organization and writings she propagated a domestic female ideal, where being a wife and mother remained the primary role of women.²² In an interview with Valerie Hoffman, al-Ghazali stated that a woman's "first, holy, and most important mission is to be a mother and wife. She cannot ignore this priority. If she then finds she has free time, she may participate in public activities."²³ The seeming paradox about al-Ghazali, which has already been discussed by Miriam Cooke²⁴ and Pauline Lewis,²⁵ is that there seems to be a great contrast between the domestic female ideal she preached and her own life as a political leader and activist. She was not only doing a job which situated her in the male public arena, but she also officially put her political activism before her marital duties. She divorced her first husband because he kept her from practicing *da'wa* – *da'wa* literally means to call or invite people to God.²⁶ This term is used by the MB for all kinds of social activities that support the establishment of the Islamic state by spreading Islamist ideas in society. When Zainab remarried, she included the following condition in her marriage contract: "In the event of any clash between the marriage contract's interest and that of *da'wah*, our marriage will end, but *da'wah* will always remain rooted in me."²⁷ This sentence shows very clearly that Zainab preferred her religious-political activism to her role as a wife, which, at first sight, seems to contradict the female ideal she preached.

So, the questions I aimed to answer when studying her memoirs were if certain narrative strategies can be found that she uses to overcome this apparent conflict. How does she present herself in the text with regard to gender-related expectations? Where does her narration contrast the Islamist female ideal and where does it reinforce it? And finally, are there narrative strategies she uses to reintegrate herself into the Islamist ideology and to legitimize her overstepping it?

20 Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 34.

21 Zainab al-Ghazali, *Naẓrāt fī Kitāb Allāhi* (Cairo: Dār ash-Shurūq, 1993).

22 Al-Ghazali in Hoffman, "An Islamic Activist": 236.

23 Hoffman, "An Islamic Activist": 236.

24 Miriam Cooke, "Zainab al-Ghazālī: Saint or Subversive?" *Die Welt des Islams, New Series* 34, no. 1 (1994): 1–20; Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004): 83–106.

25 Pauline Lewis, "Zainab al-Ghazali: Pioneer of Islamist Feminism," *Michigan Journal History* (2014) https://michiganjournalhistory.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/lewis_pauline.pdf [accessed 10.08.2021].

26 For a historical analysis of the term's origin and development, see Marius Canard, "Da'wa," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. Peri Bearman, Thierry Bianquis, Clifford Edmund Bosworth, Emeri van Donzel and Wolfhart P. Heinrichs (2012), http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_1738.

27 Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: ix.

3 The Narrative Structure of *Ayyām min ḥayyātī* and Zainab's Self-Presentation

Ayyām min ḥayyātī is written from the perspective of a first-person-narrator. The book consists of nearly 200 pages and was published in 1977. It has been translated into English, Bengali and Urdu and can easily be found on the internet. In this autobiography, Zainab mainly talks about her political activism in the *da'wa*-movement and her time in Nasser's military prison, where she was imprisoned in 1965, having been accused of plotting together with other Muslim Brotherhood members against Nasser's government.²⁸ In 1967, she was transferred to al-Qanatir women's prison, where she stayed until her release in 1971,²⁹ after Nasser had died and was followed by Anwar Sadat. Actually, if one reads her book in one sitting, it conveys the impression that the whole narration consists only of repetition, in which the same plot pattern is told over and over again. In this, Zainab, the hero of the narration, is subject to either violence, mostly in the form of torture, or blackmail attempts by the Nasser regime, which is trying to silence her or even to turn her around and make her work for Nasser. Zainab always resists. She withstands all kinds of torture and blackmail attempts and never changes her point of view. Above all, she stages her role as a martyr who has been put to the test by God to endure this suffering. This can be seen in the following dialogue with the prison guard Hasan Khalil and her torturer Shams Badran:

[Zainab]: 'I won't write anything except the truth. If you want to kill me, then do so. For it is a martyrdom that will be written with Allah, the Exalted.'

'We won't allow you this martyrdom!', snarled Hasan Khalil.

'Martyrdom is with Allah. If He wants it for anyone of his servants, He will give it.'

Recognizing my persistence, Shams' anger was overwhelming: 'Hang her in the air and flog her 500 times, so that she can know her God!'

The flogging was over, and God alone knows how I bore it.³⁰

At least 70 percent of the narrative consists of dialogues. In these, Zainab always appears intellectually and spiritually superior. She speaks in the tone of a teacher and her speech part always dominates. In prison, her speech parts in dialogues with her torturers are reminiscent of sermons rather than resembling answers in real dialogues, let alone interrogations.³¹ The same is true for the 'confessions' she is urged to write in prison, which consist of pages of religious speeches.³² She quotes often from the Quran and uses a very elaborate language and many religious terms. Thereby, she

²⁸ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 45.

²⁹ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 145, 187.

³⁰ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 112.

³¹ For example: Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 125.

³² For example: Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 81–82, 140–41.

steadily repeats the Muslim Brotherhood's message to rebuild the Islamic nation.³³ Several times she directly speaks to the reader, urging them to recognize the injustice done to her and appealing to their Muslim duty to fight for the Islamic nation.³⁴

As a result, the plot structure, the dichotomy in the constellation of actors and language, the repetition of the Islamist message, the many Qur'ān quotations and addressing the reader – all this shows the didactic function of the text. Already in the preface of the English translation, the publisher points out that the text is supposed to be “a source of inspiration and guidance for millions of people who want to see Islam thrive and flourish.”³⁵

Through visions and miracles, Zainab also appears in the role of a saint. Once she is trapped in a room with big wild dogs who are biting her, but afterwards she finds herself unharmed despite their bites.³⁶ Another time the torturers pour hundreds of mice into her cell, which miraculously flee through the window.³⁷ She also has visions, in which even the prophet himself is talking to her.³⁸ Miriam Cooke also points out that the seven torture cells through which Zainab passes “can be seen to be the obverse of the seven heavens through which Muhammad passed on the mi'raj, or his Ascension to meet with God. This then becomes the model of the saint's journey.”³⁹

To sum up, the image of Zainab we get from the text is that of a political leader, a brilliant rhetorician, an invincible fighter under God's personal protection, a martyr and finally a nightmare for her torturers and even for Nasser himself.⁴⁰ Where her male colleagues buckle,⁴¹ Zainab remains strong and persistent, encouraging and leading her prison mates. Thus, the picture Zainab paints of herself does not fit at all into the ideal of an obedient wife and mother.

In her narrative Zainab constantly oversteps gender-based etiquette. In one scene, she describes, how young men, members of the Brotherhood, visit her in her home in the middle of the night, which clearly violates gender segregation rules.⁴² In

33 On the last page of the text, Zainab repeats the dogma of the MB once more: “The establishment of an Islamic state is an obligation on Muslims and their equipment for it is the call to Allah in the same manner the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his Companions called to him. This is the mission of every Muslim whether they are from the Ikhwan or not.” Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharao*: 188.

34 Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharao*: 13, 63, 44, 54, 55, 116, 156, 166.

35 Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharao*: viii.

36 Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharao*: 50–51.

37 Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharao*: 100–101.

38 Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharao*: 53–54, 152–54, 169.

39 Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*: 95.

40 There are several places in the text where Zainab states that Nasser and the torturers are scared of her. See for example Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharao*: 77.

41 Zainab is outraged when she finds out that her fellow 'Alī 'Ashmawi has been turned in prison: “'Alī 'Ashmawi is a mischievous liar! I'll spit in his face because he is a venal fabricator of the truth!” Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharao*: 137. Cf. also Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*: 97–98.

42 Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharao*: 15.

a dialogue with her husband, she cautions him in a quite bossy way not to ask her about her political activities and reminds him of their agreement in the marriage contract.⁴³ When the young members of the Brotherhood gather in her home, it is not Zainab, but her maid who is serving the tea.⁴⁴ Actually, Zainab is never busy with any domestic work but lives the life of a political activist from the higher ranks, permanently mixing with the other gender and doing activities which fall into the ‘male’ sphere: she meets with important officials and politicians,⁴⁵ develops ideological concepts and practical action plans,⁴⁶ and is responsible for directing underground activities in the 1950s together with ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Ismā‘īl.⁴⁷

4 Narrative Strategies of Reintegration

We can find numerous narrative strategies with the help of which Zainab reintegrates into the Islamist ideal of femininity and manages to overcome the seeming contrast between her political ‘male’ role and the domestic female ideal. In the following, these strategies will be briefly sketched before presenting in part five ‘Hierarchies and Dependency’ as her most effective strategy for legitimizing her leadership role and actions, which may be at odds with Islamist gender norms and rules.

4.1 Purity and Dirt as Leitmotifs

Zainab uses purity and dirt as leitmotifs, with the help of which she identifies as a pure and chaste woman. Her style is, as already mentioned, very eloquent. It is the language of a highly educated woman, peppered with a specialist vocabulary from the Islamic theological debate of the time. Some of the religious terms she uses in dialogues and in her articles are apparently not even understood by the guards. When, during an interrogation, she is asked by her torturers about Sayyid Quṭb’s writing *Ma‘alim fī l-ṭarīq*,⁴⁸ she explains his *jihād* concept in a dogmatic speech, which leads to silence:

43 Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 37–38.

44 Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 39.

45 For example Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 34.

46 Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 39–42.

47 Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 39–42.

48 Sayyid Quṭb (1906–1966) was an Egyptian writer and intellectual and became one of the most important ideologues of the Muslim Brotherhood. He, too, was arrested in 1954 by the Nasser regime. In prison he wrote *ma‘alim fī ṭarīq* (“signs on the way”; English title: “Milestones”, published in 1964), which Zainab helped smuggle out of the prison and publish. The text consists of a practical plan for an armed *jihād* and marked a radical turn in the Muslim Brotherhood’s ideology. Later, the organiza-

Silence followed for a while, and then Hasan Khalil sarcastically exclaimed ‘She is one hell of an orator!’

‘A writer too!’, added another.

He took out a set of the Muslim Ladies’ magazine, one that had been confiscated when they raided my home. He began reading a few lines from one of my editorials. He was interrupted by Shams Badran: ‘I didn’t understand a word of what she said.’

And, as his butchers resumed their flogging: ‘Clarify what you said B!’⁴⁹

In contrast to Zainab’s language, that of her enemies in prison is rough and always vulgar. Yet, Zainab does not even reproduce these vulgar expressions. She merely describes with horror how diabolical and terrible the language of these men was. The language of Zainab is ‘pure’, while the language of her enemies, the tyrants and the infidels, is ‘dirty’ and vulgar.⁵⁰ Zainab is not willing to pollute her own language in such a way, not even by quoting them. Thus, we encounter the first indication of Islamist femininity in the narrative structures. Although purity is a religious virtue not only for women but also for men, in the Islamist ideology it is clearly assigned to the feminine, which is reflected not least in the worship of female virginity.

4.2 Dissociation from ‘Atheist’ Women

Another strategy Zainab uses to reintegrate into the Islamist ideal of femininity is the strict dissociation from the other women she meets in prison and whom she labels as ‘atheists’. After her trial in 1967, Zainab is transferred to a women’s prison together with Ḥamīda Qutb.⁵¹ The sight of the other inmates is worse for Zainab than any violence to which she was subjected in the torture prison. She describes these women as “slaves to whims and desires”, who “had forgotten their humanity, honour and dignity”.⁵² For Zainab, these women are “nothing but animals with no meaning to their lives except eating and intercourse.”⁵³ The inmates, who are described by Zainab as atheists, thus form the negative opposite of the Muslim woman and all her virtues. Zainab and Ḥamīda instantly distance themselves. They do not even want to stand in line with them, and when the guard asks them why they are standing apart, Zainab promptly replies, “We’ll stand separately. We don’t belong to this income.”⁵⁴ Through

tions distanced themselves from this militant writing. An introduction into Qutb’s writing and its reception can be found in John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (London: Hurst, 2010).

⁴⁹ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharao*: 89–90.

⁵⁰ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharao*: 47, 58, 77.

⁵¹ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharao*: 174.

⁵² Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharao*: 175.

⁵³ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharao*: 176.

⁵⁴ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharao*: 177.

this disparagement of the other women and her dissociation from them, Zainab succeeds in enhancing her own person in favor of the Islamist female ideal.

4.3 The Construction of her Mother Role

In the ideology of the MB, motherhood is the most important task of women to help build the Islamic nation. Zainab al-Ghazali also justifies her commitment to women's education with their role as mothers. As educators of the next generation, they have a responsibility to pass on the values and teachings of the community and to prepare their children for their task of establishing the Islamic nation. Zainab al-Ghazali has no children of her own, but she steadily constructs her role as mother of the younger members of the MB. In her narrative, she does this by repeatedly mentioning how the younger ones frequent her for advice and leadership, but also through numerous dialogues in which she is called "mother".⁵⁵ One of the strongest expressions of this mother role comes in a touching scene at the end, when Zainab is to be released and refuses to leave Ḥamīdah Quṭb behind:

It was a tremendous test! How was I to leave Ḥamīdah? How was I to leave her alone in this dark, lonely place, to face harsh treatment? All my being protested, 'No! No! I will not leave her!' But Ḥamīdah said: 'Mother, this is Allah's favour and mercy and all is from Him. Allah does not forget His slaves.'⁵⁶

Through the narrative presentation of her mother role, Zainab adapts her self-portrayal to the female ideal of the MB and, despite her function in public and politics, manages to present herself in the domestic role of a loving and caring mother.

4.4 Protection of her Chastity

One very striking strategy of reintegration is the protection of her chastity, which plays a central role in the Islamist idea of femininity. During torture, Zainab always stays dressed. There are several scenes in which this is emphasized.⁵⁷ Once, for example, she is to be hung upside down from the ceiling to be whipped in this position. She begs to be given pants beforehand, and her request is granted immediately:

⁵⁵ For example: Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 8, 49, 147.

⁵⁶ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 186.

⁵⁷ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 90, 92, 99, 104.

'Please give me trousers . . . I beg you!' Hasan Khalil agreed and a soldier returned with a pair so quickly you would have thought he had taken his own off. I was escorted to an adjacent room to change.⁵⁸

Not only does she get a pair of pants, but she is even allowed to change in another room. Even when she wants to go to the bathroom, she is granted privacy after a brief discussion.⁵⁹ The torturers also make several attempts to have Zainab raped by soldiers but fail constantly. One soldier refuses and converts to the 'right' faith while talking to her, whereupon he is later shot.⁶⁰ Most interesting, however, is the final rape attempt, in which Zainab uses force to defend herself for the first and only time in the entire narrative:

The soldier began begging me to tell them all they needed to know, for he had no wish to hurt me. But if he did not obey orders then a great harm would befall him. With all strength I could muster, I warned him: 'Come near me, just one step, and I'll kill you. Kill you, understand?'

I could see the man was reluctant but still he moved towards me. Before I knew it, my hands were firmly around his neck. 'Bismillah, Allahu Akbar', I shouted, and sank my teeth into the side of his neck. The man slipped out of my hands, white foam, like murky soap suds, frothed from his mouth. He fell to the ground motionless. Hardly able to believe what had happened, I slunk backwards, what little strength I had now diluted. For now, at least, I was safe. Allah, the Exalted, had infused in me a strange force. A force sufficient to overcome this beast.⁶¹

With regard to gender in the narrative, this scene forms a key moment. On the one hand, it is the scene in which Zainab acts in the most 'masculine' manner by using brute force to (presumably) kill her tormentor. However, she does so to protect her most 'feminine' side, namely her chastity. The threat to sexually abuse her is the only act of violence in the entire narrative which she does not endure with her head held high, but against which she defends herself with all her might. Obviously, one does not become a martyr by enduring rape. A woman who gambles away her chastity and thus violates the honour of her male family members seems here, to put it provocatively, to be a perpetrator rather than a victim. Zainab, who consistently refers to herself as the sister and mother of the male Muslim Brothers, thus in a manner of speaking risks the honour of the entire collective at this moment. Sexual violence is thus the only type of violence that must not be endured by a martyr and that justifies slipping into a 'male' role and defending oneself with physical violence. But the quoted scene also shows that this change of role is legitimate only under certain conditions. For one thing, it is only temporary. After having overpowered the man, Zainab instantly returns to her 'female' role: she is shocked by her act and overcome by a feeling of weakness. Nevertheless, she clearly states that the physical strength she used was given to her by God. She, as a woman, therefore, does not *per se* possess the

⁵⁸ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 90.

⁵⁹ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 54.

⁶⁰ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 95–96.

⁶¹ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 99–100.

‘masculine’ cold-bloodedness and strength necessary to carry out such an act of violence; with God’s help, she was able, to slip temporarily into the ‘masculine’ role of violent defender – and that was only done to protect her femininity.

4.5 Strategic Self-Devaluation in her Preface

Another strategy by means of which Zainab reintegrates herself into the conservative ideal of womanhood can be found at the beginning of the narrative, when she justifies her writing process:

Although I have yearned to write *Return of the Pharaoh*, now for many years, I have, nevertheless, hesitated a great deal. Had it not been for the many people, whose belief in the Islamic cause I fully trust, from amongst my children and brothers, leader of *da’wah* and exponents of it thought who lived with me during that period, believing that it was Islam’s right on us that we should record those days when Islamic *da’wah* was fought against, then perhaps it would not have come to fruition.⁶²

She thus makes it clear that she wrote this book neither on her own initiative nor for her own benefit, but only after encouragement from her brothers and sisters in the faith and in the service of the *da’wa*. Gabriele Habinger has examined such narrative strategies of “self-devaluation” using the example of European travel literature by women from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She has put forward the thesis that through this “discourse of modesty” women attempted to reintegrate themselves into the Victorian ideal of women. Since these women travellers entered the ‘male’ public sphere, on the one hand, through travelling and, on the other, through their writing, they had to justify this overstepping of boundaries upon their return.⁶³ With regards to the memoirs of other Muslim Brothers, who described similar prison experiences from that period in their memoirs, Miriam Cooke points out that “to write one’s memoirs was not a self-centered indulgence, but rather constituted an act of guidance to others”.⁶⁴ Still, Zainab’s “hesitation” to write such a piece of guidance herself could be also interpreted in Habinger’s sense as a way of reintegrating into the feminine ideal.

4.6 Sporadic Use of a We-Narrator

Another narrative strategy of reintegration can be seen in the sporadic use of a we-narrator (employing first person plural pronouns), which can be found in the intro-

⁶² Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 1.

⁶³ Gabriele Habinger, *Frauen reisen in die Fremde: Diskurse und Repräsentationen von reisenden Europäerinnen im 19. und beginnenden 20. Jahrhundert* (Vienna: Promedia, 2006): 149–52.

⁶⁴ Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*: 85.

duction and in a few other places in the text, when Zainab talks about the mission of the organization. In the introduction she writes, for example: “We believe that the period of our incarceration and torture is history’s right to know of, such that those who are on the way can study and understand it.”⁶⁵ By using a we-narrator, she once more emphasizes that this narration is not the personal story of a single woman, but the story and vision of a whole movement. At the same time, the stance of the we-narrator endows her rhetorically with a higher authority: she does not speak in the voice of an individual woman, but in that of the collective. Thus, almost the entire introduction is written from the perspective of a we-narrator.⁶⁶

5 Hierarchies and Dependency as a Narrative Legitimation Strategy

According to Zainab’s understanding of Islam and the religious community, the will of the individual must be subordinated to that of the collective. In her text she states that “Islam forms a link between its leadership and soldiers, a link which transcends individual egos and makes the pleasure of Allah the goal of all. I live in peace with that knowledge.”⁶⁷ She also calls Islam “a battle of bondage”⁶⁸ to Allah⁶⁹ and refers to herself and her brothers and sisters in faith repeatedly as “slaves” and “servants”, as could already be seen in various quotations above.

Therefore, obedience and hierarchies play a central role in the Brotherhood’s ideology. The whole organization structure is characterized by strict hierarchies between the older and experienced members and the younger ones. At the top of this pyramid there is the *murshid*, which literally means ‘master’ or ‘leader’. He is the commander of the whole organization and must be obeyed at all costs.⁷⁰ The central role of this hierarchical relationship between teacher and pupil and the total devotion of the individual to the cause of the group can be traced back to Sufi teachings, which had a strong impact on the founder Hasan al-Bannā and the organization in its formative period.⁷¹ Among other things, the practical and popular orientation of the group could also be attributed to the Sufi influence. Pauline Lewis has already pointed out

65 Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 2.

66 Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 1–3.

67 Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 60.

68 The Arabic word *‘ubūdīya* can also be translated as ‘slavery’ or ‘servitude’.

69 Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 183.

70 Richard Paul Mitchel, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969): 164–66.

71 Mitchel, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*: 2–7. Whereas the Sufi influence was strong in the early formative period, according to Lia, the Brotherhood slowly distanced themselves from Sufi elements during the 1930s. Cf. Lia, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*: 38.

that this influence of Sufi ideology might explain Zainab's overstepping of certain aspects of gender-based etiquette.⁷² Sufism emphasizes the personal and spiritual relationship between God and the believer and, therefore, does not distinguish between men and women in the way orthodox Islam does. Already in the medieval period Sufi shrines were religious institutions where women were very active, quite unlike in the male-dominated mosque.⁷³ So, according to Pauline Lewis, Zainab did not perceive herself primarily as a woman, but as a spiritual being who reached a certain level on her way to God, where she is free from any worldly temptations, which implies that certain social rules do not apply to her any longer.⁷⁴ Lewis also points out that the strict hierarchical order between teacher and pupil might explain why Zainab favored her allegiance to God and also to Hasan al-Bannā, the leader of the organization, who she understood to be a mediator between God and herself, over that to her husband.⁷⁵ Miriam Cooke indicates in her analysis of al-Ghazali's memoirs that the primacy of building the Islamic state "provides a loophole for women's activism and public agency."⁷⁶ While the feminine domestic role is described as the "ideal peacetime behaviour", Zainab's situation as a fighter in *jihād* "meant improvising new rules of conduct".⁷⁷ She concludes that "this hierarchy allows her to use the Islamic legal system to empower herself."⁷⁸ In the following, I will draw upon these approaches and show how Zainab uses these spiritual hierarchies and the dependency on God in particular in her narrative to legitimize actions, which could be considered inappropriate for a woman according to Islamist ideology.

The first time she utilizes hierarchies as a narrative legitimation strategy is to cope with a disagreement between her and Hasan al-Bannā in 1937. This happens in the first part of the book, where Zainab describes her religious-political activities before her imprisonment.⁷⁹ It is the year 1937, shortly after Zainab got in touch with Hasan al-Bannā for the first time. Al-Bannā asks Zainab to integrate the Muslim Ladies Association into the Brotherhood's organization structure, but Zainab refuses to do so. Eleven years later, in 1948, the Muslim Brotherhood was dissolved by the state and thousands of its member were put in jail. From her brother's wife and cousin Tahia al-Jubali, who was a member of the Brotherhood's ladies branch called the Muslim Sisters, she heard some details about the events, which she does not specify but which make her suddenly regret her decision from 1937:

⁷² Lewis, "Zainab al-Ghazali": 21.

⁷³ Cf. Yossef Rapoport, *Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 39.

⁷⁴ Rapoport, *Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society*.

⁷⁵ Rapoport, *Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society*: 18–19.

⁷⁶ Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*: 91.

⁷⁷ Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*: 87.

⁷⁸ Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*: 102.

⁷⁹ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 25–26.

It was then, that I found myself, for the first time, eager to support all of al-Banna's opinions and understood his insistence on completely merging the Muslim Ladies Group into the Ikhwan. In my office, the same office where my last meeting with al-Banna had taken place, the morning after the dissolution of the Ikhwan, I could not help putting my head in my hands and crying bitterly. I believed that al-Banna was right. He was the Imam that all Muslims must pledge allegiance to, in order that they struggle for the return of Muslims to their position of responsibility and true existence, and can implement Allah's commands. I felt that al-Banna was stronger than me and franker in disseminating and announcing the truth.⁸⁰

After this, Zainab sends a message to al-Bannā, in which she pledges allegiance to him:

Zainab al-Ghazali presents herself today devoid of everything except her servitude to Allah and her enslavement in the call to Him. You are today the only person who can do to this Ummah something for the Call to Allah in a way that pleases Him. Waiting for your instructions and orders.⁸¹

Here, Zainab not only recognizes al-Bannā as a political and spiritual authority, who she must obey in accordance with her believes, but she also attributes to him the gift of knowing and implementing God's will, giving him the highest possible authority. Therefore, Zainab completely subordinates herself to his will and in the first part of the quotation, she also seems to regret her disobedience to al-Bannā's demand in 1937. Even though she does not state this explicitly, one certainly gets this impression when we picture her crying in her office. Just a page later, Zainab meets al-Bannā personally and repeats her pledge again in a short dialogue:

'I pledge allegiance to you for the establishment of the Islamic State. The least I can give for this, is shedding my blood and merging the Muslim Ladies Group with the Ikhwan.'
'I accept the pledge, but the Muslim Ladies Group remains at it is.'⁸²

Her indirect admission of having been wrong is thus revised only one page later by al-Bannā's answer, who obviously does not want the merger of the organizations anymore, which seems logical due to the political situation. As readers, we already know that the independence of the Muslim Women's Society from the MB could delay its forced closure for a few years and that Zainab's decision in 1937 was therefore, probably, for the best of the entire organization. It is striking that she mentions neither her disobedience nor al-Bannā's retroactive legitimization of her actions verbatim, but leaves both between the lines. Therefore, I want to argue that she uses al-Bannā's speech strategically to express that her former actions were right. By doing so, she

⁸⁰ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 26.

⁸¹ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 26.

⁸² Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 27.

utilizes al-Bannā's authority as the leader of the group and as mediator between God and the members to legitimize her disobedience from 1937 in retrospect.

This narrative strategy, in which she legitimizes her own political actions through a man who is above her in the hierarchy, can be found again in several places. The first repetition occurs just two pages later: Zainab makes use of an ellipsis of one year and tells of al-Bannā's death in 1949, for which she blames the government. Hasan al-Huḍaibī is appointed as new *murshid* and adopts a more moderate course. Then, in 1952, the MB supports the military coup and begins to cooperate with the military officers around Nasser. Zainab is shocked by this new, liberal stance and begins publishing critical statements in her women's magazine strongly condemning any cooperation with the secular government. Despite being admonished by another Muslim Brother, she continues until a personal order from al-Huḍaibī is delivered to her:

'Abd al-Wadīr 'Awdah again visited me, but this time with an order from al-Hudaibi, asking me to stop my commentary. I recalled my pledge of allegiance to Hasan al-Banna – may Allah have mercy on his soul – and felt my loyalty incumbent in respect of his successor. I obeyed the order.

From then on, all my activities had to conform to my pledge of allegiance to the Ikhwan, even to the extent of requiring the Murshid's prior consent for everything, including my participation in the Vienna Peace Conference.⁸³

Since the Nasser government would turn against the MB only a few months later and start persecuting its members, it is clear to us as readers once again that Zainab was also right in this instance and that al-Huḍaibī would in the near future regret his decision to cooperate with Nasser. But again, these obvious conclusions are deliberately not stated by the narrator but left between the lines. Once more, her action is legitimized by the next higher authority in the command hierarchy, in this case al-Huḍaibī, who sent her the order to stop the commentary.

Another time when Zainab took the initiative and became politically active without instructions from the organisation was in 1955, after many members of the MB had been imprisoned and executed by the Nasser regime. She writes:

I found myself, in 1955, recruited to serve Islamic da'wah without anyone's invitation. [. . .] I felt as if I were responsible for the lost, the hungry, the dispossessed and the oppressed. [. . .] In desperation, I went to see my eminent teacher Shaykh Muhammad al-Awdan, one of the very few pure and pious people of Azhar. I was in the habit of consulting him in all da'wah affairs and issues related to Islamic learning. Like myself he held the view that the non-annexation of the Muslim Ladies Group might well serve the Ikhwan in the near future. The Shaykh was also aware of my pledge to al-Banna which he both blessed and supported. He was also aware of my allegiance to da'wah.⁸⁴

⁸³ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 28.

⁸⁴ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 31–32.

Zainab tells the Sheikh about her urge to do something and he responds by kissing her hand and saying: “Don’t hesitate to give any help you can. Allah is the One who blesses endeavours.”⁸⁵ This marks the beginning of Zainab’s steep ascent to one of the two top positions of the MB in the underground. It is no coincidence that she intersperses this dialogue precisely at this point, i.e. shortly before she talks about her activities as *de facto* leader of the Brotherhood (and not only of a women’s organization). It is precisely at this time that Zainab is clearly performing a masculine role that departs from the female ideal.

In this passage, we can find three instances of legitimization: First, Zainab legitimizes her own initiative through the call of the poor and oppressed, indeed the call of the *da’wa*, that is, essentially, her religious commitment to God. Then there is the Sheikh, who is depicted as a pious teacher and serves as another instance offering legitimization by giving his blessings to her future actions. The MB’s critical attitude toward the traditional Azhar-scholars becomes clear in the scholars’ description, as Zainab indirectly disparages the entire group by singling out one individual in this way. Finally, there is also Hasan al-Bannā, who is not alive anymore but whose authority is in a way transferred to the Sheikh, when she writes that he knows about the pledge. What is particularly interesting is that she thereby not only legitimizes her future actions, but also again justifies her supposed misconduct of 1937 by pointing out that the Sheikh endorsed her decision.

On the next page, the same strategy is drawn upon again when she meets ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Isma‘il, with whom Zainab will jointly direct the underground activities of the entire organization. They ‘accidentally’ meet in Saudi Arabia, when Zainab is taking the Hajj, the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca:

It was ‘Abd al-Fattah Isma‘il who, after greeting me, explained that he knew about my pledge to Hasan al-Banna after our long disagreement. I asked about the source of his information and he told me it was al-Banna himself. After further enquiries about what he wanted, he explained that he hoped I would meet him in Makkah, for the sake of Allah, to talk about what al-Banna wanted from me, God willing.⁸⁶

‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Isma‘il and Zainab then meet in Mecca and discuss their plan to rebuild the MB underground. Again, this action of Zainab’s, which would theoretically fall within the male sphere of responsibility, is legitimized by her oath of allegiance to al-Bannā, the validity of which thus extends beyond his death. And again, her ‘disobedience’ of 1937 is mentioned (“after our long disagreement”), with which her supposed misstep seems more and more transparent to the reader and, thus, less open to attack.

⁸⁵ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 32.

⁸⁶ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 33.

As we were about to leave, he enjoined: 'We have to link ourselves here with a pledge of allegiance that we will fight in His sake and won't languor until we unite the ranks of the Ikhwan, and isolate all those who do not want to work for Him, no matter what their position or weight'

We swore our allegiance to fight and die for the sake of his Da'wah, and shortly afterwards I returned to Egypt.⁸⁷

Zainab again swears an oath of allegiance that pre-emptively legitimizes her future activities and protects her from criticism that the political leadership role she was to exercise in the coming months was not appropriate for a woman. Additionally, al-Huḍaibī's permission is sought, who, as the new *murshid*, provides the next highest degree of legitimacy. In the following pages, Zainab repeats the insertion "with al-Huḍaibī's permission" at several points when describing her underground political activities,⁸⁸ again legitimizing her actions. Zainab constantly justifies her actions, which fall in the political realm and are at odds with the domestic female ideal, with her obligations to spiritual teachers and leaders like al-Bannā, the Sheikh, al-Huḍaibī, and 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Ismā'īl as a transmitter of al-Bannā's will.

Although Zainab acknowledges al-Bannā as the mediator between her and God's will, it becomes clear, not least through visions and dreams in which she encounters Muhammad, that she certainly also has a direct connection to God. He, who is the highest authority in the hierarchical order, therefore also provides Zainab with the strongest legitimation. Although she often justifies her actions by means of the approval and commands of men, God's authority ultimately prevails. In her first vision, she finds herself in a desert, standing behind a "great, reverent man":⁸⁹

I wondered silently: Could this man be the Prophet (peace be upon him)?

Silence has no safeguard with the Prophet, who replied: 'Zainab! You are following in the footsteps of Muhammad, Allah's Servant and Messenger.'

'Am I, master! Following the footsteps of Muhammad, Allah's Servant and Messenger?'

'You, Zainab al-Ghazali are following in the footsteps of Muhammad, Allah's Servant and Messenger.'

'O my Beloved! Am I truly following in your footsteps?'

'Zainab! You are on the right path. You are on the right path, Zainab! You are following the footsteps of Muhammad, Allah's Servant and Messenger!'

Twice more I repeated my question, receiving the same response from the Prophet.⁹⁰

As Miriam Cooke observes, the way Zainab addresses the Prophet ("my beloved"; in Arabic "ya ḥabībī") is a Sufi invocation. In addition, in the fourth line the English translation "You, Zainab al-Ghazali" differs from the Arabic original, where Muhammad calls Zainab only "Ghazali", which literally means "my gazelle". These affection-

⁸⁷ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 34–35.

⁸⁸ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 39, 40, 42.

⁸⁹ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 53.

⁹⁰ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 53.

ate forms of address indicate the intimacy of their relationship.⁹¹ So in this vision, Zainab constantly confirms being on the right path by using the Prophet's voice. Thereby, she invokes the highest possible authority and legitimizes all her actions, be they appropriate for her gender or not.

6 Conclusion

This paper explored the narrative structure of Zainab al-Ghazali's memoirs *Ayyām min ḥayyātī* with a focus on the connection of dependency and gender. Taking the contrast between the domestic female ideal of the MB and Zainab's life as a political leader as a starting point, several narrative strategies used by the author to reintegrate into the Islamist female ideal have been analysed: purity and dirt as leitmotifs (4.1), the delimitation from atheist women (4.2), the construction of her mother role (4.3), the protection of her chastity (4.4.), strategic self-devaluation in the preface (4.5), the sporadic use of a we-narrator (4.5), and finally hierarchies and dependencies, which function as narrative strategies to legitimize her actions (5). It has been shown how Zainab intersperses dialogues with leaders of the organization and with spiritual teachers as well as references to pledges of allegiances before or during her descriptions of her political actions, which could be considered to be at odds with the female ideal. Her dependency on these figures of authority and the hierarchical structure of the organization functions as a narrative legitimation strategy for her actions and enables her to overcome her dependency on rules and norms resulting from her gender.

For Zainab, the relationship between her and God as well as the spiritual relationship to her brothers and sisters in faith is situated above all other, worldly ties, including marriage. At the end of her narration, she says explicitly that "[m]arriage is only a contingent worldly event, but brotherhood in Allah is everlasting".⁹² So, for her, total surrender to God and the abandonment of individual will represent the central aspects of her religion; in her words, Islam is "a battle of bondage to Allah".⁹³ This unconditional submission to God ultimately overcomes all other worldly dependencies and hierarchies, including her physical dependency on the torturers, but also hierarchies between men and women. While gender functions as a structuring criterion in worldly hierarchies, it no longer plays a role in spiritual ones. In the narrative structure of her text this understanding is continuously reinforced through dialogues in which Zainab encounters men either as superior or at eye level and through her visions, in which the Prophet Muhammad himself legitimizes Zainab's actions. So, for Zainab, as a

⁹¹ Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*: 95–96.

⁹² Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 163.

⁹³ Al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*: 183. This interpretation is also inherent in the literal meaning of the term "Islam", which can be translated as "submission" or "submission to God".

chosen believer, who is in direct contact with God, it is only logical that in the spiritual hierarchy she is above most men despite her gender, without contradicting Islamist ideology.

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