

Recognizing Women's Agency: Historical Depictions of Zubaidah bint Ja'far's Philanthropic Activities and Patronage within the Abbasid Public Sphere

Siti Mariam Ulfah¹, Juliani Syafitri¹ & Muhammad Hafis^{2*}

¹Universitas PTIQ Jakarta, Indonesia

²Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: muhammadhafis1505@gmail.com

Abstract

*This article examines the strategic role of Zubaidah bint Ja'far, the wife of Caliph Harun al-Rashid, in shaping the intellectual and cultural milieu of the Abbasid Dynasty through women's agency in informal domains, particularly philanthropy and patronage. Employing a historical-analytical methodology, the study analyzes primary sources, including classical Islamic chronicles, alongside secondary literature on patronage, philanthropy, and gender studies within Islamic history. The analysis is informed by Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, as articulated in *The Second Sex*, to interpret the tension between women's status as the Other within a patriarchal system and Zubaidah's role as an active agent influencing civilization. The findings indicate that Zubaidah transcended structural constraints through monumental social and religious initiatives, notably the construction of the Darb Zubaidah pilgrimage route – now recognized by UNESCO – and extensive water infrastructure projects. Additionally, her patronage of the arts and sciences, encompassing support for poets, scholars, and the establishment of literary salons, underscores her substantial contribution to the consolidation of the Abbasid intellectual tradition. The study concludes that, despite lacking formal political authority, Zubaidah successfully established enduring social and cultural infrastructures. This research advances Islamic historiography by demonstrating that women's agency was not peripheral but functioned as a transformative force shaping the course of civilization, thereby opening avenues for further inquiry into women's roles across historical contexts.*

Abstrak

Artikel ini menyoroti peran strategis Zubaidah binti Ja'far, istri Khalifah Harun al-Rasyid, dalam membentuk iklim intelektual dan budaya pada masa Dinasti Abbasiyah melalui agensi perempuan dalam ranah non-formal, khususnya filantropi dan patronase. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan historis-analitis dengan menelaah sumber primer berupa kronik klasik Islam dan sumber sekunder terkait patronase, filantropi, serta studi gender dalam sejarah Islam. Analisis didasarkan pada kerangka feminisme eksistensialis Simone de Beauvoir dalam "*The Second Sex*" untuk menafsirkan kontradiksi posisi perempuan sebagai the "other" di tengah sistem patriarki dengan kapasitas Zubaidah sebagai subjek aktif yang membentuk peradaban. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa Zubaidah melampaui keterbatasan strukturalnya melalui proyek sosial dan keagamaan yang monumental, antara lain pembangunan jalur haji Darb Zubaidah – yang kini diakui UNESCO – serta infrastruktur air berskala luas. Selain itu, perannya sebagai patron seni dan ilmu pengetahuan, termasuk dukungan terhadap penyair, cendekiawan, dan penyelenggaraan majelis sastra, memperlihatkan kontribusi signifikan dalam penguatan tradisi intelektual Abbasiyah. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa meskipun tidak menempati jabatan formal, Zubaidah mampu menciptakan infrastruktur sosial dan kultural yang berkelanjutan. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada kajian historiografi Islam dengan menunjukkan bahwa agensi perempuan tidak bersifat marjinal, melainkan dapat menjadi kekuatan transformasional yang menentukan arah peradaban, sekaligus membuka ruang bagi studi lanjutan mengenai peran perempuan lintas periode sejarah.

Keywords:

Women's agency;
Patronage;
Philanthropy;
Abbasid Dynasty;
Feminist existentialism

Kata kunci:

Agensi perempuan;
Patronase;
Filantropi;
Dinasti Abbasiyah;
Eksistensialisme feminis

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Introduction

The conventional historiography of Islam predominantly emphasizes the roles of men throughout the various caliphate periods, focusing on their governmental positions, policy decisions, and the consequent effects on the state¹. Nonetheless, certain women emerged as influential figures who made significant societal contributions despite lacking formal authority within the political hierarchy². The Abbasid Dynasty provides a notable example in Zubaidah bint Ja'far, the wife of Caliph Harun al-Rashid³. Although women's participation in official governance was markedly restricted, Zubaidah exemplified how women could wield substantial influence through informal means such as philanthropy and patronage. Her sponsorship of public works, including the development of water infrastructure for pilgrims, as well as her support for scientific and artistic endeavors, demonstrates that women's impact could extend beyond the structural constraints of their time.

In comparison to prominent female figures such as Khaizuran—the mother of Caliph Harun al-Rashid, who exerted considerable influence over court politics through familial networks—Zubaidah bint Ja'far exemplifies a distinct yet equally transformative form of female agency. Whereas Khaizuran consolidated power primarily through motherhood and discreet political negotiations, Zubaidah manifested her influence more openly via intellectual patronage and strategic philanthropy. She spearheaded monumental initiatives, including the construction of the Darb Zubaidah water network to facilitate pilgrimage, financed scholarly institutions, and served as a patron to scholars and artists⁴. Her contributions extended beyond charitable acts to establish a socio-intellectual infrastructure that persisted well beyond her lifetime. This contrast in approaches highlights the heterogeneity of women's empowerment during the Abbasid period; Zubaidah's example illustrates that philanthropy and patronage functioned as instruments of legitimacy comparable to formal political authority, thereby securing a lasting legacy within the rich historical narrative of Islamic civilization.

¹ Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, trans. Cecep Lukman Yasin and Dedi Slamet Riyadi (Jakarta: Qaf, 2024), 395-413.

² Gamze Çavdar dan Yavuz Yaşar, "Moving Beyond Culturalism and Formalism: Islam, Women, and Political Unrest in the Middle East," *Feminist Economics* 20, no. 4 (Oktober 2, 2014): 33-57, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13545701.2014.933858>.

³ Zubaidah bint Jafar (764-831 CE), wife of Caliph Harun al-Rashid, was an influential figure in the Abbasid era. Known for being intelligent, eloquent, and generous, she actively supported intellectual development by patronizing writers, poets, and doctors. His monumental philanthropic projects included the construction of the Iraq-Makkah road and the "Zubaidah Spring" aqueduct that brought water to Makkah, still functioning today. She was also instrumental in court diplomacy and socio-cultural transformation. Zubaidah died after performing the Hajj, leaving behind a legacy of infrastructure and scholarly patronage that was influential across generations, making her one of the most influential women in Islamic history. Wijdan Fareeq Enad, "Overland Hajj Route Darb Zubayda," *Muslim Heritage*, last modified 2021, diakses Mei 23, 2024, <https://muslimheritage.com/darb-zubayda/>.

⁴ Nabia Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad: Kisah Dua Ratu Dinasti Abbasiyah*, trans. Juslich Hanafi (Jakarta: Republika Penerbit, 2021), 53.

Her role significantly influenced cultural and intellectual development, establishing a legacy that endures to the present day. Zubaidah's philanthropic initiatives—most notably the establishment of the Darb Zubaidah pilgrimage route, which is now recognized by UNESCO, along with extensive water infrastructure projects—exemplify her ability to affect public welfare beyond the domestic realm. The Darb Zubaidah holds considerable historical importance as an integral component of Islamic and Arab heritage and is currently being recontextualized within the framework of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 as a foundational element for cultural tourism development. This route functions not only as a symbol of geographical and spiritual continuity but is also envisioned as an economic driver and a significant cultural corridor, facilitated through sustainable tourism practices, digital innovation, and active engagement with local communities.⁵

The Abbasid Caliphate is recognized as one of the golden eras in Islamic history, evidenced by its significant advancements in politics, economics, science, art, and culture. Its period of prominence extended from the mid-eighth century to approximately the mid-ninth century. Zubaidah was associated with six caliphs, either directly or indirectly;⁶ however, she assumed a more active role in patronage and philanthropy following her marriage to Harun.

Several previous studies have investigated Zubaidah bint Ja'far within the framework of Abbasid history. Nabia Abbot's seminal work, *Two Queens of Baghdad* (1946)⁷, analyzes the power dynamics between Zubaidah and Khaizuran as "shadow queens" through the perspective of court politics. While this study is highly insightful, it does not address the role of philanthropy as a mechanism for social transformation. Khulkar Ostanakulova's recent research⁸ expands the scope by comparing the strategies employed by Zubaidah and Khaizuran, with a primary focus on the social mobility of elite women. Remziye Seçen's scholarship⁹ offers detailed analysis of Zubaidah's patronage of the arts; however, it does not incorporate gender theory to explore women's agency within patriarchal structures. Similarly, Monica Moscatelli¹⁰ provides important insights into Zubaidah's artistic patronage but does not connect this to gender theoretical frameworks. Moscatelli also examines the contemporary

⁵ Monica Moscatelli, "Heritage as a Driver of Sustainable Tourism Development: The Case Study of the Darb Zubaydah Hajj Pilgrimage Route," *Sustainability* 16, no. 16 (Agustus 2024): 7055.

⁶ Nabia Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad: Kisah Dua Ratu Dinasti Abbasiyah*, trans. Juslich Hanafi (Jakarta: Republika Penerbit, 2021), 1

⁷ Nabia Abbot, *Two Queens of Baghdad: Mother and Wife Harun al-Rashid* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1946), 137.

⁸ Khulkar Ostanakulova, "From Slavery To Becoming A Lady In The Abbasid Era," *american Journal of Pedagogical and Educational Research* 17, no. 1 (2023): 145-150, <https://americanjournal.org/index.php/ajper/article/view/1376>.

⁹ Remziye SEÇEN, "Zubaidah Bint Ja'far and Her Effects in Cultural, Artistic, and Social Life in Her Period," *Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi*, no. 20 (Maret 10, 2024): 130-151, <http://dergipark.org.tr/en/doi/10.46250/kulturder.1427289>.

¹⁰ Monica Moscatelli, "Heritage as a Driver of Sustainable Tourism Development: The Case Study of the Darb Zubaydah Hajj Pilgrimage Route," *Sustainability* 16, no. 16 (Agustus 16, 2024): 7055, <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/16/16/7055>.

legacy of Darb Zubaidah, yet her work does not emphasize its historical origins as a philanthropic initiative aimed at community empowerment.

In contrast to previous studies, this paper not only describes Zubaidah's role in philanthropy and patronage but also investigates her broader significance. Employing Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialist framework, the study examines the tension between Zubaidah's status as the Other within the Abbasid patriarchal system and her agency as an active subject who contributed to the shaping of civilization. Through this analysis, the research underscores the critical role of informal political influence exercised by women in medieval Islamic history. The findings advance the scholarly discourse on the interrelations of gender, power, and agency within Islamic civilization.

This study adopts a qualitative historical-analytical approach that integrates historical source analysis with feminist theoretical interpretation. The methodology combines traditional historical methods with Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist framework to examine the agency of Zubaidah binti Ja'far within the patriarchal context of the Abbasid Dynasty. Data will be systematically analyzed to draw informed conclusions. Furthermore, the research situates Zubaidah's contributions within the broader socio-political landscape of the Abbasid era, elucidating the structures of power and influence accessible to women of her status. The analysis also addresses the impact of her patronage on cultural and intellectual developments, particularly her support for literary gatherings and scholarly activities. By investigating these dimensions, the study aims to underscore the significance of informal political influence exercised by women in medieval Islamic history. The findings contribute to ongoing scholarly discussions concerning gender roles, power dynamics, and agency within Islamic civilization.

Results and Discussion

Conceptual Understanding of Patronage and Philanthropy

1. Patronage

Patronage is a term translated from the English "patronage," which comes from the words "patron" and "client". The origin of the term "patron" comes from Spanish which etymologically refers to someone who has power, status, authority, and influence.¹¹ The term patron comes from the Latin "patrönus" or "pater", meaning father. Meanwhile, client also comes from the Latin term "cliëns", which means follower.¹² In social science literature, patron refers to a social relationship that involves control of economic resources. The concept of patron is always related to the concept of client; without the client, the concept of patron would not exist.¹³

¹¹ Haryanto dan Muhammad Mahsun, "Business and Politics in Urban Indonesia: Patrimonialism, Oligarchy and the State in Two Towns," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 43, no. 2 (Agustus 23, 2024): 177-197, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/18681034241264574>.

¹² Webster, *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language*, 338

¹³ Haryanto dan Mahsun, "Business and Politics in Urban Indonesia: Patrimonialism, Oligarchy and the State in Two Towns."

The patron-client relationship-a role reversal relationship-can be thought of as a special case of dyadic (two-person) relationships involving largely instrumental friendships, in which a person of higher socioeconomic status (the patron) uses his or her influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, to a person of lower status (the client), who, in turn, reciprocates by providing general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron.¹⁴ Patronage is a practice or system in which a person or entity with power, wealth, or influence provides financial support, protection, or other assistance to an individual or group in need. In a historical or political context, patronage often involves an asymmetrical relationship between the giver (patron) and receiver (client), where the receiver recognizes the authority or power of the giver in exchange for the support provided.¹⁵

2. Philanthropy

Etymologically, philanthropy comes from the Greek: Philos (love) and Anthros (human). In terminology, philanthropy refers to the concept of voluntary giving, services, and association to help those in need as an expression of love. Therefore, philanthropy is often considered as voluntary action for the public good.¹⁶ In KBBI, philanthropy means love (generosity and so on) to others.¹⁷ The definition of philanthropy in the American Heritage Dictionary includes three aspects: 1) An effort or inclination to enhance human well-being through charitable aid or donations, 2) A love for humankind in general, 3) An activity or institution aimed at promoting human welfare.¹⁸ Thus, philanthropy in this dictionary is described in terms of action, sentiment, and social institutions/activities.

Philanthropy is not a new concept in Islam. However, the practice of philanthropy has been implemented long before the term itself emerged. Various forms of charitable giving are taught in Islam, including zakat, infak, and sadaqah, which serve as both religious obligations and mechanisms for social justice and economic redistribution.¹⁹ Over time, philanthropy has become linked to broader ideologies such as civil society and gender, reflecting structured generosity aimed at

¹⁴ James C. Scott, "Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia," *American Political Science Review* 66, no. 1 (Maret 1, 1972): 91-113, https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S0003055400138936/type/journal_article.

¹⁵ Diego Fossati et al., "Ideological representation in clientelistic democracies: The Indonesian case," *Electoral Studies* 63 (Februari 2020): 102111, <https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S026137941930304X>.

¹⁶ Ridwan dan Sri Hidayati, *Filantropi Islam untuk Pembangunan di Indonesia: Sebuah Tinjauan Kritis* (Jakarta: LPDP, 2023).

¹⁷ KBBI, "Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI) [Online]," 2018, <https://kbbi.web.id/filantropi>. Accessed on May 19, 2024.

¹⁸ Harper Collins, "The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Online)" (2022). Accessed on February 25, 2025.

¹⁹ M. Wildan Humaidi, Hariyanto Hariyanto, dan Mabarroh Azizah, "Green philanthropy: Islamic activism on Indonesia's environmental democracy," *Ijtihad: Jurnal Wacana Hukum Islam dan Kemanusiaan* 24, no. 2 (Desember 28, 2024): 167-191, <https://ejournal.uinsalatiga.ac.id/index.php/ijtihad/article/view/869>.

addressing long-term social issues like poverty.²⁰ Beyond material aid, it focuses on creating sustainable solutions through initiatives in education, healthcare, and economic development. Philanthropy also plays a crucial role in bridging gaps where government support is insufficient while fostering solidarity and responsibility among individuals and organizations.²¹ In modern society, it has evolved beyond individual charity and is now institutionalized through foundations and nonprofit organizations, ensuring lasting impact and contributing to systemic change.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that Patronage and philanthropy are two different frameworks in social dynamics and motivation. Patronage involves a hierarchical relationship between a patron (an owner of power, wealth, or influence) and a client who receives support, with reciprocal exchanges such as loyalty or services as compensation. The system is instrumental, aiming to strengthen the patron's socio-political position through networks of dependency, such as financial support to artists for cultural legitimacy or political favors to maintain the loyalty of followers. In contrast, philanthropy is altruistic, focusing on the voluntary giving of resources (financial, material) for humanitarian purposes without direct reward, such as the construction of schools or the provision of clean water. Where patronage entrenches power structures through reciprocal transactions, philanthropy aims to create systemic and sustainable change, often through structured institutions such as foundations, to address social disparities such as poverty or access to education. While patronage emphasizes domination and short-term exchange, philanthropy is oriented towards social solidarity and long-term impact, making it a transformative tool that transcends individual interests.

Power Structure of the Abbasid Dynasty and the Role of Women during the Era of Zubaidah

The Abbasid dynasty had a male-dominated formal government structure, with the caliph as the highest authority who delegated civil affairs to the vizier, the judiciary to the judge, and the military to the amir. Provincial governors were appointed/dismissed by the vizier with the approval of the caliph, while the vizier also oversaw departments such as taxes and complaints.²² However, women like Zubaidah played an important role through informal channels such as patronage, philanthropy and court diplomacy, showing that political influence was not monopolized by men.

²⁰ K. K. Letova dan E. A. Kurenkova, "Women's issue and women's movement in Russia in pre-revolutionary Russian historiography," *Bulletin of the State University of Education. Series: History and Political Sciences*, no. 1 (April 5, 2024): 133-140, <https://www.istpolitmgou.ru/jour/article/view/1817>.

²¹ Abdul Aziz et al., "Analysis of the Factors Influencing the Philanthropy Behavior in the Industrial Revolution Era 4.0," *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences (PJLSS)* 22, no. 1 (2024), https://pjlss.edu.pk/articles/2024_1/2904-2923.htm.

²² Hugh Kennedy, "The Rise and Fall of the Early 'Abbāsid Political and Military Elite," in *Transregional and Regional Elites-Connecting the Early Islamic Empire* (De Gruyter, 2020), 99-114, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110669800-005/html>.

In the early Abbasid dynasty, women had the same freedom as women in the Umayyad dynasty. But towards the end of the tenth century, a strict system of seclusion and segregation by sex was introduced. The scientific and intellectual advances of the time led to advanced education, so literacy rates were very high for both men and women. They could learn and develop their skills. Adult education was carried out systematically in mosques in almost every city that served as the main educational center.²³ Bait al-Hikmah was not simply a storage house for books, map manuscripts, and was not entrusted to ordinary employees, instead, it operated as a knowledge and learning group and it gathered young and old men and women who were enthusiastic to learn, teach and debate.

During the first Abbasid period (circa 750-900) there were slaves and freedmen living in the major urban centers. This can be seen in the elite female artists at the Abbasid court. This is recorded in the 10th-century book *al-Aghani* (Book of Songs) by Abu al-Faraj al-Isbahani (d. 972).²⁴ Talented slaves received training and education tailored to their talents, such as Dananir from the Barmak family. He received an education in Medina and learned instrumental and vocal music from the best teachers, both women and men.²⁵ Another story illustrates the high intelligence possessed by a slave girl. Asma'i - a literary scholar - was ordered by Harun to check her knowledge. He tested her with various recitations of the Qur'an, in grammar and the science of poetry, language and literature, and historical narration. It turned out that the girl excelled in all of them.²⁶

Upper-class women like Zubaydah have high economic security. They are used to living in luxury and covered in jewelry, in addition to getting access to good education. Her wealth increased after she married Harun. She owned vast lands, gardens, and several palaces in western Baghdad and Iraq. Zubaidah employed secretaries and servants to manage her property. At the same time, she spent a large amount of her wealth on charity, like Queen Khayzuran. But no matter how talented women are, public office positions are all occupied by men. The absence of women in public office means that women do not have access to direct political decisions. Even so, women can still exert influence on political life through non-formal channels such as those carried out by the nobility.²⁷ Khayzuran and Zubaydah were among the court officials who influenced caliphate decisions through their patronage and philanthropic activism.

²³ Adel M. AbdulAziz Algeriani dan Mawloud Mohadi, "The House of Wisdom (Bayt al-Hikmah), an educational institution during the time of the Abbasid dynasty. A historical perspective," *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 27, no. 2 (2019): 1297-1313.

²⁴ Matthew S. Gordon and Kathryn A. Hain, *Concubines and Courtesans: Women and Slavery in Islamic History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 27.

²⁵ Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad: Kisah Dua Ratu Dinasti Abbasiyah*, 159

²⁶ Abbott, 171

²⁷ Jiaqi Luo et al., "A gender perspective analysis of Chinese nationals' leisure time allocation: Family life cycle versus demographic determinants," *Journal of Leisure Research* 55, no. 2 (Maret 14, 2024): 185-207, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00222216.2023.2199002>.

The Role of Patronage and Philanthropy as Foundations of Abbasid Authority and Cultural Heritage

1. Patronage

During this period, many individuals gained fame throughout the Islamic geography for their contributions to educational institutions, including mosques and kuttab. The educational emphasis in these institutions was on memorization, in line with Arabic tradition. Harun al-Rashid encouraged the growth of Arabic literature by supporting the generation of falsafi poetry which was a major advance. The assistance given by the state administration towards education and training resulted in an increase in written and oral literature. The caliph himself showed a personal inclination towards the fields of science, Islamic studies, mysticism and poetry. Likewise, Zubaidah bint Ja'far had a keen interest in science, literature and academia. She often attended scientific assemblies and meetings held at the palace.²⁸ Not only did she attend, but Zubaidah initiated intellectual and artistic events in palaces, mosques and homes.²⁹

By organizing and supporting this event, artists and scholars have a platform to showcase their work and interact with a wider audience. This increases their appreciation, as well as culture and science. In addition, the financial support provided allows artists, writers and scholars to work without having to worry about their daily needs. This encourages them to produce great and innovative works. In addition, moral support from an influential figure like Zubaidah increases their social status and legitimacy in society. Zubaidah also contributed to the education of women, it is mentioned that she gave girls the opportunity to receive education in the palace.³⁰ Zubaidah also had 100 female servants who memorized the Qur'an. They took turns reading the Qur'an every day in the palace.³¹

Zubaidah actively supported poets and scholars, commissioning verses dedicated to herself and rewarding them generously. She fostered environments where poetry and music thrived as tools for artistic expression and political messaging, recognizing their power to influence individuals and governance. Abbasid rulers, including her, strategically aligned poets with state affairs. Zubaidah organized gatherings to celebrate their work, solidifying her reputation as a patron of arts and intellectualism. Notably, poet Salm bin Amr al-Hasir sold jewelry gifted by her for 20,000 dinars, and after his death, records revealed he retained 1.5 million dirhams from her patronage. Her efforts underscored poetry's dual role in cultural enrichment and power dynamics during the Abbasid era.

²⁸ Remziye Seçen, "Zubaidah Bint Ja'far and Her Effects in Cultural, Artistic, and Social Life in Her Period," *Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi* 20 (2024): 130-151.

²⁹ Husein Muhammad, *Perempuan Ulama di Atas Panggung Sejarah* (Yogyakarta: IRCiSoD, 2020), 124

³⁰ Seçen, "Zubaidah Bint Ja'far and Her Effects in Cultural, Artistic, and Social Life in Her Period."

³¹ Muhammad, *Perempuan Ulama Di Atas Panggung Sejarah*, 124

2. Philanthropy

Zubaidah bint Ja'far significantly bolstered the Abbasid Caliphate's authority through strategic philanthropy. Her most notable achievement was developing Darb Zubaydah, a vital 1,300-kilometer pilgrimage and trade route linking Kufa to Mecca. She transformed this hazardous path by constructing wells, reservoirs, and rest stations, ensuring safe travel in the desert. Renamed in her honor, the route became a lifeline for pilgrims and traders, enhancing economic and religious cohesion across the caliphate. Beyond infrastructure, Zubaidah's initiatives in water management and public services reinforced Abbasid governance, showcasing her role in merging humanitarian efforts with state legitimacy. Her legacy endures as a testament to how strategic patronage solidified cultural and political power during Islam's golden age.³²

Darb Zubaidah not only provided water and security for pilgrims, but also became a cosmopolitan place for cultural and commercial activities. People from different regions meet, trade, and exchange cultural ideas and historical stories. The route remains active for six months for pilgrims and the remaining six months for local merchants. It is said that Zubaidah spent the equivalent of 5,950 kg of gold on this project and when she was given the written cost, she sat in her palace near her pond and she threw the paper into the pond without looking and said I seek her reward from Allah on the Day of Judgment.³³ When first informed of the high cost of this project, he said that it had to be completed even though each axe stroke cost one dinar.

Ibn Batutta states: 'Every cistern, pond, and well on this road, which runs from Makkah to Baghdad is thanks to her great bounty. Had it not been for her care on behalf of this road, it would not have been usable by anyone.' Her engineers moved in the direction of the qibla and drew a map of more than 1,200 kilometers and the road was divided into forty shelter stations for caravans and their animals. Tall towers lit with fire were erected for navigational purposes. All these structures served millions of pilgrims from all over the world for over a thousand years. Darb Zubaidah starts from Baghdad and passes through Kufa, Najaf and Qadsiya, reaching Naqra, where it bifurcates toward Medina.³⁴ The enduring legacy of this infrastructure highlights the significance of Zubaidah's contributions to Islamic history and pilgrimage.

Geographers, particularly al-Harbi, that Yaqut, as mentioned by Saad, mentioned nine places (some of which were also mentioned by al-Harbi) that were associated with Zubaydah. These places are as follows: al-Muḥdath, a stopping place located six miles beyond an-Naqirah; al-'Unabah, which is a birkah between Tûz and Samirah; Birkat Umm Ja'far between al-Mughithah and al-'Udhayb; Qunay'ah, a

³² Permanent Delegation of Saudi Arabia to UNESCO, "The Hajj Pilgrimage Routes: The Darb Zubaydah (Saudi Arabia)," *Unesco*. Accessed on May 20, 2024.

³³ Saima, Naseer Ahmad Akhtar, dan Azhar Usama, "Thrones of Wisdom: Rediscovering the Empowered Reigns of Muslim Women Throughout Islamic History," *Russian Law Journal* 11, no. 3 (2023): 2054–2062.

³⁴ Fariha Qadir Mela, "Muslim Women Rulers: A study of Islamic History," *Al-Qawārīr* 01, no. 04 (2020): 1–13.

reservoir located between ath-Tha'labiyyah and al-Khuzaimiyyah; al-Hasani, a dug well near Ma'din an-Naqirah; Qarûra, a station located between Ma'din an-Naqirah and al-Hajir, which was equipped with a birkah, qasr (fort), and dug well. Az-Zubaydiyyah is a station between al Mughîthah and al-'Udhayb. This station is equipped with a birkah, qasr, and mosque. Al-Haytham was a station between al-Qa' and Zubalah, which was equipped with a birkah and qasr. Finally, Yaqut reports a birkah built by Zubaidah two miles from at-Tanahi, which is the station between Batan and ath-Tha'labiyyah.³⁵

The reason for making this darb was motivated when Zubaidah and Harun went on pilgrimage. According to Ibn Abd Rabbih, Harun al-Rashid visited Mecca on foot with Queen Zubaidah. In the fall of 806 CE, while performing the pilgrimage Zubaidah was informed that there was a serious shortage of water on the road and that the pilgrims were suffering. On Zubaidah's orders, the Zam-Zam well was deepened by 4-5 meters and the amount of water was increased. After that, Zubaidah built the Ain al-Mushash aqueduct in the Hunain valley, 10-12 miles away from Mecca. In all, Zubaidah spent seven hundred and fifty thousand one million seven hundred thousand dinars from his own funds to organize the water supply for the pilgrims. The bay in the Arafat valley, where the pilgrims gathered to immortalize her work, was named "Zubaidah's Bay".³⁶

Al-Azraqi and al-Fakhi give a brief account of the water installations, inside and outside Mecca, which were implemented and subsidized by Zubaydah. The water flow network consisted of cisterns, basins connected to each other by canals, and channels to convey water within the Holy City. One of the large reservoirs built by Zubaydah was equipped with a room to house the watchman, who was in charge of guarding the reservoir.³⁷ Additionally, aqueducts were constructed to transport water from distant sources, ensuring a steady supply for residents and pilgrims. These engineering marvels significantly improved sanitation and public health in Mecca. The project also included fountains and public drinking stations to provide easy access to clean water.

Zubaidah's charitable activities were not limited to the holy cities, but were also carried out in various parts of the Caliphate. Hospitals were built along the western borders of the Caliphate. In Bagros, she organized free caravanserai for visitors and also gave gifts to the needy. Zubaidah showed her financial activity in the restoration of the destroyed cities. The reconstruction of Tabriz, Varsan and Kashan are associated with Zubaidah's name. In addition, Harun al-Rashid minted coins in the cities of al-Muhammadiyah and Madin Bajinaus in which Zubaidah's title was included. During the al-Amin period, on the occasion of Zubaidah's fiftieth birthday, a dirham coin was minted in her honor in 195 A.H. She performed the Hajj for the last time in 831 A.H.

³⁵ Al-Rashid, 303.

³⁶ Khulkar Ostanakulova, "From Slavery to Becoming a Lady in The Abbasid Era," *American Journal of Pedagogical and Educational Research* 17 (2023): 145-150.

³⁷ Al-Rashid, "A Critical Study of the Pilgrim Road Between Kufa and Mecca (Darb Zubaydah) with the Aid of Fieldwork."

and on the way she spent one million dinars on travel expenses and another two million dinars on the construction of schools and water facilities in the holy cities.³⁸ For the maintenance of the water installations in Mecca (and probably along the way), Zubaydah left many waqfs with a yield of thirty thousand dinars per year. He also spent about fifty million dinars in sixty days on one of his visits to the Holy City.³⁹

Darb Zubaydah, the historic pilgrimage route from Kufa to Mecca, plays a strategic role in the revitalization of Islamic and Arab cultural heritage through a sustainable tourism approach. The development of this route is assessed across four key dimensions: cultural, environmental, spatial, and economic. The key findings indicate that the revitalization of Darb Zubaydah not only strengthens local identity but also serves as a new economic engine that integrates heritage preservation with community engagement and digital strategies. The proposed phased development plan—beginning from the Fayd oasis to the Iraqi border—enables an efficient and integrated managerial approach aligned with the objectives of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.⁴⁰ However, challenges such as limited archaeological resources and the risk of excessive commercialization necessitate balanced policies between conservation and development. This route is not only of historical significance but also holds the potential to serve as a global model for the development of other cultural routes.

Zubaidah and the Existential Freedom of Women in Islamic History

In her seminal work *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir offers a critical examination of patriarchal structures that designate man as *The One*—the Subject—and woman as *The Other*, thereby marginalizing female existence and agency.⁴¹ In this relational dynamic, man is positioned as the central subject of human experience, while woman is constructed as the object—defined not in her own right, but through her relation to man. She is cast as passive, subordinated, and deprived of an autonomous identity independent of male-determined norms. This asymmetry is not confined to the private sphere, such as the family, but permeates broader socio-political structures, reinforcing systemic gender inequality.

As analyzed by Van den Brandt in the context of Western Europe, the representation of women in cultural media often reflects their struggle to negotiate identity amid patriarchal structures and dominant religious norms.⁴² However, within the historical context of the Abbasid period, Zubaidah emerges as an anomaly to this gendered construction. She refused to remain in the position of *the Other* or a mere

³⁸ Ostanakulova, "From Slavery to Becoming a Lady in The Abbasid Era."

³⁹ Al-Rashid, "A Critical Study of the Pilgrim Road Between Kufa and Mecca (Darb Zubaydah) with the Aid of Fieldwork."

⁴⁰ Moscatelli, "Heritage as a Driver of Sustainable Tourism Development: The Case Study of the Darb Zubaydah Hajj Pilgrimage Route."

⁴¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Lowe and Brydone LTD, 1956), 15.

⁴² Siti Mariam Ulfah dan Juliani Syafitri, "Nella Van den Brandt: Religion, Gender, and Race in Western European Arts and Culture: Thinking Through Religious Transformation Nella Van denBrandtReligion, Gender, and Race in Western European Arts and Culture: Thinking Through Religious TransformationL," *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 37, no. 2 (Desember 13, 2024): 129–130, <https://www.scup.com/doi/10.18261/njrs.37.2.6>.

object within a male-dominated narrative. Although she did not hold formal political authority, Zubaidah strategically utilized her position as the caliph's wife to cultivate spheres of cultural, intellectual, and social influence. Aware of her status as *the Other*, she did not submit to it; rather, through that very awareness, she reconstructed her identity as an active agent in history.

As a woman, Zubaidah also embodied the principle of freedom as theorized by Simone de Beauvoir. She was not merely an appendage to the figure of Harun al-Rashid, but autonomously determined the course of her own life—making major decisions such as the monumental construction of the Darb Zubaidah, funding water canals for Hajj pilgrims, and establishing literary salons within the palace. These actions exemplify the existence of a free woman who, according to Beauvoir, is a human being who recognizes herself as a subject and, through that recognition, is capable of designing her own life.⁴³ In this context, Zubaidah deliberately constructed her own trajectory of devotion to humanity—an articulation of existential freedom rarely accessible to women of her era. Her agency challenges the normative limitations imposed upon female subjects in classical Islamic society, positioning her not only as a historical figure of influence but also as a symbol of autonomous female subjectivity.

In the dialectic between subject and object as articulated by Beauvoir, Zubaidah functioned not merely as an object instrumental to the construction of her husband's image; rather, she emerged as a subject who exerted influence and catalyzed change. She transcended the constraints imposed by patriarchal culture by making substantive contributions to the development of Islamic civilization. In this regard, Zubaidah exemplifies a woman who both exists and exercises freedom—not simply present in history, but leaving an indelible mark that demands recognition. When compared to other prominent women, such as Khaizuran, the mother of Harun al-Rashid, who also wielded considerable political influence within the caliphate, it becomes apparent that Zubaidah pursued a different yet equally potent path. Whereas Khaizuran negotiated power through familial ties (mother-ruler), Zubaidah did so via intellectual and social avenues. Both figures demonstrate that women need not invariably occupy subordinate positions and illustrate distinct strategies for asserting their agency.

As emphasized in ecocentrism studies Syafitri & Ulfah,⁴⁴ the exploitation of nature and women stems from capitalist anthropocentrism—a paradigm that disregards the intrinsic value of all entities. Zubaidah bint Ja'far demonstrates that women are not merely victims but can become agents of transformation through philanthropic and patronage initiatives. Her contributions challenge dominant narratives that marginalize women's roles, asserting that women deserve recognition

⁴³ Simone de Beauvoir, *Second Sex: Fakta Dan Mitos* (Yogyakarta: Narasi Pustaka Prometheus, 2016), 63.

⁴⁴ Juliani Syafitri dan Siti Mariam Ulfah, "Ecocentrism as Reconciliation of The Exploitation of Women and Nature by Capitalist Anthropocentrism: A Review of The Interpretation of Al-Tahrir wa Al-Tanwir," *Al-'Allamah: Journal of Scriptures and Ulama Studies* 1, no. 1 (Juni 29, 2024): 1–20, <https://al-allamah.istiqlal.or.id/index.php/pkumi/article/view/1>.

as active subjects in shaping civilization—without being sacrificed to power-driven agendas or exploitation.

Conclusion

Zubaidah bint Ja'far, despite not holding any formal political office, played a crucial role in shaping the cultural and intellectual heritage of the Abbasid Caliphate through her philanthropic and patronage activities. As the wife of Caliph Harun al-Rashid, she effectively utilized her informal influence to support infrastructure development, education, and the arts, thereby fostering the flourishing of Abbasid civilization. Her patronage of poets, scholars, and public works—such as the Darb Zubaidah and water canals for Hajj pilgrims—highlights the significant role women could assume through non-state mechanisms. Zubaidah's legacy challenges prevailing historical narratives that often marginalize female agency in Islamic history, illustrating that substantial impact can be achieved outside formal political structures.

This study is limited by the availability of historical sources, which predominantly focus on male figures and official state actors, consequently marginalizing women's narratives or reducing them to anecdotal references. Future research should consider comparative analyses between Zubaidah and other prominent women in both Islamic and non-Islamic civilizations to more precisely identify patterns of female patronage and informal political engagement. Furthermore, the integration of interdisciplinary methodologies—such as gender theory, literary analysis, and material culture studies—would deepen our comprehension of the ways in which women shaped historical developments within complex patriarchal frameworks.

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