
TITLE SOME INSIGHTS INTO WOMEN'S RESPECT IN ANCIENT EGYPT

MOHAMMED HERAGI

FACULTY OF TOURISM AND HOTELS, LUXOR UNIVERSITY, EGYPT

MARWA EZZAT

THE EGYPTIAN HIGHER INSTITUTE OF TOURISM AND HOTELS, EGYPT

ASEEL NAGATI

THE EGYPTIAN HIGHER INSTITUTE OF TOURISM AND HOTELS, EGYPT

ABSTRACT

Women enjoyed great respect and a high status in ancient Egypt. They experienced the same rights as men, occupied different ranks, and became leaders in some cases. Generally, they had their effective social role as mothers, wives and daughters. Undoubtedly, the importance of women's role had been clearly mirrored in many aspects in art. Indeed, women were treated with honor and respect whether they were common folks or elites. The way women appeared in art reflected their position in the Egyptian society. This esteem bestowed to ancient Egyptian women is clear in many scenes. This article aims to shed the light on some of these aspects showing the difference in the way of treatment and representation between male and female either in punishment or in showing physical disability. As for punishment, women and men received the same penalties. Yet, when it comes to women punishment, a different interaction appeared in representation. Concerning people with physical disability, they were freely depicted in private tombs scenes. Likewise, when it comes to represent a woman's disability, a different approach might be taken. Such ways of women's depiction shaped their heritage in Egypt.

KEYWORDS: Punishment; Physical disability; Women status; Scenes; Women's heritage; Egyptian Society

INTRODUCTION

Women enjoyed a great important position and status throughout ancient Egyptian History (Gay, 1993). They were respected, appreciated and honored whether they were common folks or elites. Ancient Egyptian women were extremely intelligent and ambitious; they served as leaders, mothers, wives, and enjoyed their political and economic rights, as well as their independency throughout ancient Egyptian History. It is worth

mentioning that the king in his capacity as King of Upper and Lower Egypt was responsible for establishing Maat, so is the case for women, they also had to maintain Maat, each in her special field and place (Brian, 2019). All this prestige, respect, and reverence rendered to ancient Egyptian females shaped women's heritage in Egypt.

Furthermore, the Egyptian religion enjoyed female clergy, as there were many goddesses in ancient Egypt who had their own priestesses such as goddesses Hathor and Isis (Gillam, 1995; Sheldon, 1996). God's wife of Amun is another considerable position and title appeared since the Middle Kingdom and given to women of different classes of the society (Ayad, 2009). However, since the New Kingdom this title as well as such position was held by the daughters of the king who were extremely influential women who served in the temple of Amun at Thebes (Graefe, 1981). Their position is a political one embedded in religion, which relied on their theoretical intermarriage with the supreme god Amun, who in return kept the fertility of the land and preserved the prosperity of the country. Yet, practically, the aim was to supervise the priests of Amun in Thebes (Brian, 2019).

Indeed, the position of women in the Egyptian society, and the esteem bestowed to them is clearly evident in many aspects in private tombs scenes. This paper explores how women enjoyed great respect and a very high status in ancient Egypt. They experienced the same rights as men, occupied different ranks, and became leaders in some cases. Generally, they had their effective social role as mothers, wives and daughters. Undoubtedly, the importance of their role is clearly mirrored in many aspects in the ancient Egyptian art. It also highlights some of these aspects showing the difference in the way of treatment and representation between male and female.

METHODOLOGY

The research relied on descriptive analytical approach that is concerned with collecting data on some of these aspects showing the difference in the way of treatment and representation between male and female through a three-tiered analysis:

- I. Woman's respect and independency depicted in private tomb scenes and stelae since the old kingdom while on the royal scenes, the New Kingdom queens were depicted smiting enemies or fighting upon the royal chariots.
- II. The difference between male and female in showing physical punishment.

III. The difference between male and female in showing physical disability.

DISCUSSION

WOMEN'S RESPECT AND INDEPENDENCY IN SCENES

Since the Old Kingdom, Women representation enjoyed independency as same as men in ancient Egypt. (Fischer, 2000). One of the oldest examples is a scene of a woman appeared alone without her husband on a block from the tomb of Meryet discovered in Saqqara and dated to the late 4th Dynasty (Hodjash and Berlev, 1982), where she is represented, standing accompanied with her children (McCorquodale, 2010) a daughter and a son both reaching the height of her knee (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Block from the tomb of Meryet, Saqqara, late 4th Dynasty. “Source: (Hodjash and Berlev (1982), pp.60-62, pl. 2.)”

Another example is the stela of Neni, the high priestess of goddess Hathor, Nag-ed-Deir, 1st Intermediate Period (Dunham, 1937), where Neni appears standing alone without being accompanied by husband, or children. She is wearing long fitting dress and sniffing lotus symbol of regeneration in ancient Egypt (Figure. 2).



Figure. 2. Stela of Neni, Nag-ed-Deir, 1st Intermediate Period.

“Source: (After Dunham (1937), pp. 65-66, pl. 16.1.)”

Moreover, during the New Kingdom, Egyptian queens enjoyed unique representation showing them at war shooting foreign female enemies (Figure. 3) in the same way as the king used to be depicted (Hoffmann, 2008). Likewise, Queen Nefertiti, wife of Akhenaton, appeared on a limestone block smiting Asian male enemies (Figure. 4) (Cooney, 1965).



Figure. 3. Royal woman shooting arrows against enemies

“Source: (After Hoffmann (2008), p.52)”



Figure. 4. Queen Nefertiti smiting Asian enemy

“Source: (After https://scontent.fcail9-7.fna.fbcdn.net/v/t1.6435-9/105955654_1125310827838947_4231905549483838909_n.png?_nc_cat=111&ccb=1-7&_nc_sid=730e14&_nc_ohc=DjnlfORQBsgAX8hT_Jj&_nc_ht=scontent.fcail9-7.fna&oh=00_AfD7xvVEBGDExugtkkHPmvj_YJ88Yb5mnPDFyXXezkqo5Q&oe=64C2CA81)”

Such scenes of attacking enemies, was not restricted to royal women but we have a remarkable representation from a tomb at Deshasheh (Figure. 5) dated to the Old Kingdom showing non-royal women attacking invaders; one stabbing a bow-man by a dagger, while the other woman leading a boy with a blade to another man (Fischer, 2000). Indeed, the scene reflected the courageousness of the two women and indicated their effective role in protecting the city especially in the absence of men who might have been engaged in wars outside the city.

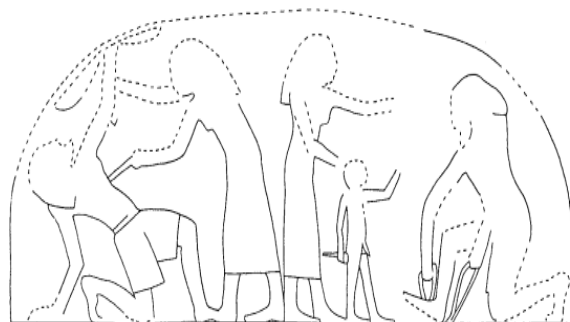


Fig (5) Two non-royal women attacking invaders

“Source: (After Fischer, 2000, p.44, Fig. 33)”

Finally, a funerary stela dated to the 3rd Intermediate Period, 22nd Dynasty, found in the Ramesseum at Thebes (uchicago.edu). This stela was erected to commemorate lady Djed-Khonsu-es-ankh who appears standing in a transparent white gown, and pouring libation before a seated figure of the sun god Re-Harakhty (Figure. 6).



Figure. 6. Stela of Djed-Khonsu-es-ankh, 3rd Intermediate Period, 22nd Dynasty

“Source: (After uchicago.edu)”

II. PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT

In ancient Egypt, physical punishment existed in many ways. It varied between beating, dragging on the floor, tying necks, tying arms, mutilation in addition to many other ways according to the crime (‘bd ālltyf, 1993; Slyn, 2001; Mhmd, 1995). Men mostly appear in punishment scenes naked and tied around a whipping-post with officials raising their batons to strike their backs as appeared on the walls of Mereruka (Figure. 7) and Khentika (Figure. 8) tombs at Saqqara (*OIP* 31, 1938; James, 1953).



Figure. 7. Punishment scene, Mereruka tomb

“Source: (After: *OIP* 31, 1938, pl. 37)”

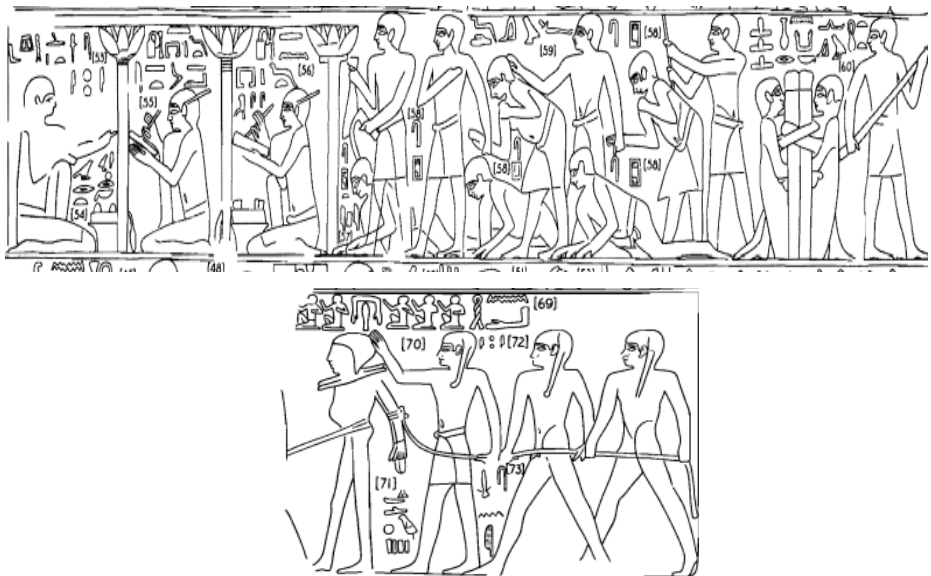


Figure. 8. Punishment scene, Khentika tomb

“Source: (After; James (1953), pp. 20-22, 43-46, pls. IX and XI)”

Moreover, the walls of Henqu II (Davies, 1902), tomb of the northern cliff of Deir el-Gebrawi near Asyut, reveals a unique scene of a charged man, naked and wearing a type of yoke around his neck, and his hands are tied to a heavy object, most probably a tree trunk, which he drags along the road (Figure. 9).

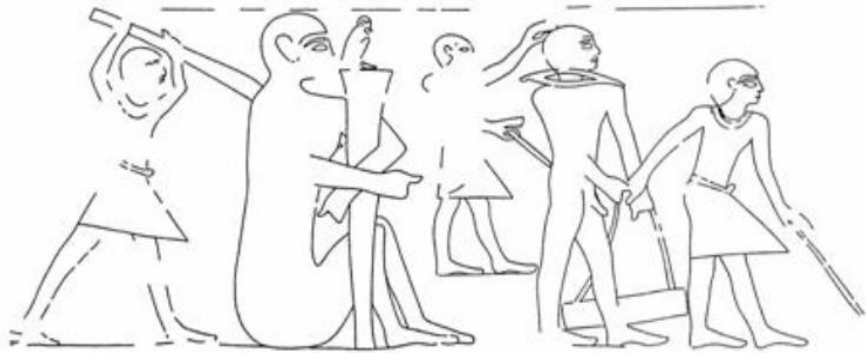


Figure. 9. Punishment Scene, Henqu II Tomb

“Source: (After: Davies, 1902, p.27)”

Since women experienced the same rights as men, they shared the same destiny and penalties as well (Fyād, 1995). Yet, when it comes to women’s physical punishment (Nāṣf, 2022), a different interaction appeared in representation showing respect, kindness and tenderness in dealing with the condemned women.

Such mercy concerning women’s punishment appeared in an exceptional scene carved on the southern wall of the main hall of the tomb of Baqet III, the governor of the Oryx nome, dated to the reign of Amenemhat I, 11th Dynasty, Middle Kingdom (Newberry 1893). This unique scene is a part of a large scene represents stock-taking, the collection of cattle tax (Kanawati and Wood, 2010) and the destiny of those who evaded the payment of such tax.

The scene shows a woman being punished among group of men who violated tax payment (Figure. 10), yet she is treated with a different way appeared clearly in representation. As the artist was so cautious in representing woman’s physical punishment shown evidently in both her position and the method of punishment.

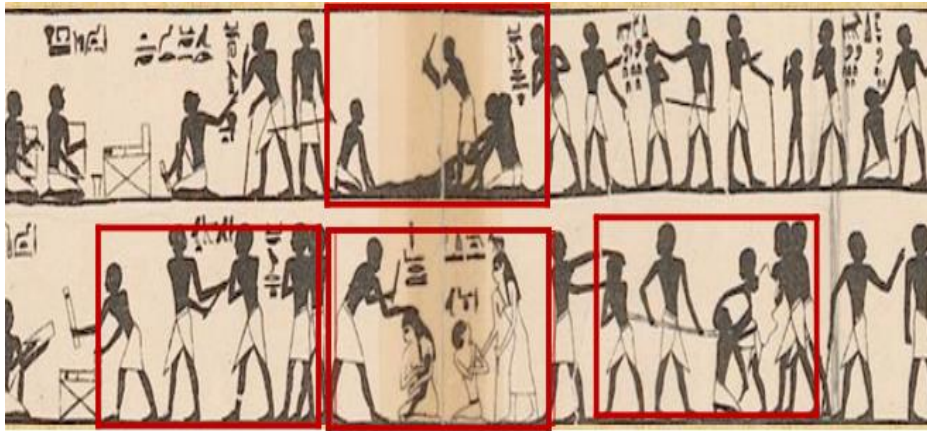


Figure. 10. Woman was being punished among group of men
“Source: (After; Newberry, 1893, pl.VII)”

The woman, case of study, represented in lighter color, appears seated holding her infant before the tax collector in total submission. She is shown with her head facing downwards before the tax collector who is depicted putting his left hand over her head and holding a stick with his right hand (Figure. 11).



Figure 11. Woman punishment Scene, Tomb of Baqet III, 11th Dyn.






“Source: (After: Kanawati and Wood, 2010, p.70)”

As for the way of holding the baton by the tax collector against the woman, it is totally different compared to men. The collectors in case of men appear holding the stick with both hands raising it up high reflecting the hardness of the beat. On contrary, he used only one hand when dealing with the woman. The representation is so realistic reflecting the woman's submissiveness, yet she didn't beg the man standing in front of her as if she knows that he won't cross the limit. While, in men's punishment scenes all men are depicted with their heads up as if they are talking and begging to the tax collector.

Concerning the reason behind the woman's punishment, it may be attributed either to her violation of paying her own taxes, since woman enjoyed their own financial independency, or she is punished on behalf of her children as their legal guardian after the death of her husband. This is indicated by the presence of a kneeling figure of a boy that is most probably her son. He looks very terrified and being appeased by an old lady standing behind him who is mostly his grandmother (Nāşf, 2022) (Figure. 11).

Regarding the text accompanying the scene, the cruelty and the roughness in the treatment of men is also evident in using some words indicating mercilessness. However, this kind of texts does not appear in the case of woman.




As the ancient Egyptian language is flexible and rich in its vocabularies, So, we find multiple words expressing the physical

punishment of beating in ancient Egypt such as  *skri* , *knkn* , *hw-ny* , *tkkt*  (Wb I,168; Wb III, 46,49,466; Wb V,146)

This punishment scene (Fig. 11) showing a group of tax collectors, while treating a shepherd in total humiliation and cruelty. The scene depicts a man lying on the ground naked and beaten by group of men, and one of the supervisors standing witnessing the punishment closely in gloat and saying:

di.k sw r t3 n ib  (Newberry, 1893)

“Put him on the ground for my sake” (Ālfār, 2010)

Regarding the text accompanying the woman's punishment, it can be noticed that the collector ordering the lady to stand up ^{ḥꜥ} r.t ". While, the inscription above her son's head states ^{iꜥnw}  which means "O woe to me" that refers to his fear and sadness. As for the text inscribed above the old lady's head ^{s.ms šdt}  it may be interpreted as "Let the female (be beaten) by the stick" (Guglielmi, 1973). This interpretation fits the collector and not the old woman, as it was not necessary in daily scenes to place the texts above its speaker (Nāşf, 2022).

Hence, it is clear that just as there was a difference in the way of treatment, there is a distinction in the way of talking to man and woman. As in the case of man's punishment, the collector said "leave him on the ground". While, in the case of woman's punishment, the collector asked her politely to "stand up".

Undoubtedly, the ancient Egyptian showed shyness and mercy in dealing with woman's punishment in scenes, even if it reflected some firmness and hardness practiced by the ancient Egyptians regarding breaking rules and laws. Yet, showing mercy concerning women's punishment in scenes mirrored the culture of the ancient Egyptian society in dealing with woman, and the respect rendered to her.

3.III. PHYSICAL DISABILITY

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), disability is an open term that includes impairment (a problem in body function or structure), activity limitation (difficulty in executing certain activity), as well as participation restriction (difficulty in involvement in life situations) (WHO, no date). Therefore, disability is a complex phenomenon combined between the problems in the person's body and the features of his society. Disability can also be defined as any structural, or psychological case that limits a person's activity or restricts his involvement in life situations (Zakrzewski, 2014).


The ancient Egyptians accepted physical disability. They showed respect to disabled people socially and culturally. This idea clearly appeared in wisdom writings and moral teaching. As in the teachings of Amenemope: (Griffith, 1926; Lichtheim, 1976).

"Beware of robbing a wretch or attacking a cripple".

“Do not laugh at a blind man, nor tease a dwarf, nor cause hardship for the lame.”

“Don’t tease a man who is in the hand of the god (i.e. ill or insane) ...”

In Ancient Egypt disability was thought to be a gift from the god to humans. The disabled persons were imitating divine attributes from gods as there were some gods shown with deformity such as god Bes (Mahran, 2016). On the other side it is hardly to find any goddess shown with deformity, yet it may appear in texts as in the case of goddess Rpwet from the Old Kingdom, whose name is written with a determinative showing an

armless seated woman in a shrine  (Leitz, 2002).

All classes of people who suffered physical disability were involved in the Egyptian society and they were not excluded from interacting with their community. Disabled persons also attained high ranks in ancient Egyptian court (El-Aguizy, 1987).

As a result, persons with disability were freely depicted in scenes. The representations of physical deformity in art can be classified into different types such as dwarfism, leg deformities, back deformities, arm deformities...etc. (Elshafey, 1998).

Although persons with disability are freely depicted in scenes, yet when it comes to represent a woman’s disability, a different approach might be taken. This appears in a remarkable scene (Figure. 12) in the tomb of Nakht (TT 52) at Thebes. The tomb is located at the foot of the slope of the northern part of Sheikh Abd el-Qurna. Nakht was a scribe and a serving priest during the 18th Dynasty, New Kingdom. On the eastern wall, southern side of the outer chamber, there is a scene that depicts Nakht supervising the ploughing and sowing of his fields (Davies, 1917).



Figure. 12. Nakht supervising his fields

“Source: (After Davies, 1917, pl. 18)”

In this scene, there are two women shown standing while pulling up flax by the roots and form it into bundles. The woman, case of study, is shown wearing a long sleeve dress, having only one arm (Mahmoud, 2018). However, the other woman is wearing a one strap dress revealing her both arms (Figure. 13). The artist here might intentionally choose the long sleeve dress for the deformed woman in order to show his sympathy for the psychological state of women, who always want to appear in the best possible way.



Figure 13. Two women plucking flax

“Source: (After Mahmoud, 2018, fig. 6)”

On the other hand, during the Old Kingdom the artist freely depicted women with back deformity (Figure. 14) and dwarfism (Mahran, 2016). Likewise, the representation of armless female figures appeared in the underworld scenes. On Contrary, such armless female figures completely disappeared during the New Kingdom and they were only limited to male armless figures (Figure. 15) (El-Nadi, 2021).

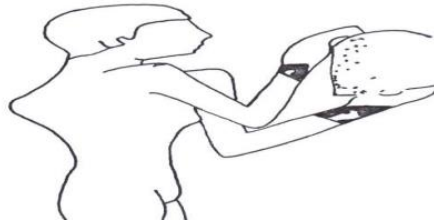


Figure. 14. A servant with back deformity

“Source: (After Mahran, 2016, fig. 6)”



Figure. 15. Armless male figures in the underworld

“Source: (After El-Nadi, 2021, fig. 10)”

CONCLUSION

Women, royal or non-royal, enjoyed great prestige and attention throughout ancient Egyptian history. Such status was clearly obvious in many aspects such as titles, positions, receiving and granting offerings, yet above all representation in art.

As mentioned in the Poetics of the Greek philosopher Aristotle “The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance”. Indeed, women’s representation in ancient Egyptian art conveys a certain message that reflects the culture of the ancient Egyptian

society, its reverence and respect for women. The studied scenes reflected women's significant treatment that is completely different from that of men accompanying her in the scene or in a different scene but same occasion.

The study concluded the following:

1. In ancient Egypt, women enjoyed independency in appearance and representation same as men and on different occasions, whether they were common folks or elites. They were freely depicted without being accompanied by their husbands in funerary scenes, offering scenes, and even in war scenes.
2. Egyptian society has always respected laws and was so keen to implement them strictly even if it reflected some firmness and hardness. Undoubtedly, women and men received the same destiny and penalties. Yet, the ancient Egyptians showed shyness and mercy concerning women's physical punishment scenes, which strongly reflects the culture of the ancient Egyptian society and its respect for women and their appearance in this type of scenes.
3. Ancient Egyptians showed sympathy dealing with women's deformity in scenes, either in daily life scenes or underworld scenes which strongly mirrored the care for the psychological state of women, who always want to appear in the most beautiful image.
4. It can be noticed that scenes of women's deformity compared to scenes of men's disability appeared in rare cases during the Old Kingdom. However, it is hardly to find any of these scenes dating back to the New Kingdom in both daily life scenes and underworld scenes.

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