

Marta Domínguez Díaz

II.16 Sufism

The relationship of women with Sufism awakes a significant amount of interest, both among Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as among academics and religious practitioners. Until quite recently, scholars considered Sufism to grant women degrees of agency (both in the exercise of their faith and in terms of authority) unseen in non-Sufi Islamic traditions. Part of these claims were based on the prominent role women may have had in the formative period of this religious tradition. In modern times, the argument of the Sufi exceptionality with regards to female religious agency has been at a times used by Muslim women as an argument in defence of claims for a more prominent role of women in religion (used as a form of historical validation) when facing their critics. Yet, scholars have more recently begun to add nuance to our understanding of the past, by coming to consider two main aspects; first, that we may have overestimated the degree of agency and the centrality of medieval female Muslim mystics, and second, that Sufism rather than an anomaly within the Islamic tradition, should be better considered as an integral part of it (Knysh 2019), being women's forms of participation in Sufism attuned with theirs in non-Sufi Islamic traditions.

1 Gender in Medieval Sufism

The Sufi tradition has an ambivalent position with regards to gender; on the one hand, it oftentimes renders both God and the human soul as genderless, and on the other, Sufi writings and experience has in its majority obeyed to an androcentric and patriarchal understanding of society and religion. Sufi literature is normally inclined to categorise existence into sets of antagonist categories, such as hidden and apparent, or, spiritual and material and in those descriptions the feminine gender is usually equated with the latter (Abdel-Latif forthcoming). Shaikh (2012) explains that the androcentric character of most Sufi literature renders a non-sexist reading of Sufism arduous, as more often than not, women have been depicted as inferior, as well as intellectually and spiritually less capable – the exception to that trend is offered by the famous mystic Ibn 'Arabi (d. 240) who suggests that women are better qualified spiritually, and that God is most perfectly witnessed by them (Shaikh 2012, 173).

One of the problems academics highlight when assessing the role women played in the development of Sufism is that all what we know about them, are accounts written by men, in most cases in a later period. In reality, it is very little

what we know about these earlier women as they are seldom mentioned in the sources (Sylvers 2015, 24). What recent scholarship seems to largely agree on is that the women's marginalization in early (but also later) Islamic literature does not mean they were not present or active in mystical congregations, but rather, that there were efforts directed towards controlling them, aiming, specially, at restricting their public life (Holmes Katz 2013, 177–214) one in which, later on, the figure of the otherworldly female mystic, secluded and silent, would work as a powerful and useful emblem. The liberal usage of these historical figures by modern Muslim women, give to this story a twist, as the female representations that were once used to develop idealised portrayals of otherworldly Muslim female identity are nowadays used to reclaim religious agency and surpass restrictions of a gendered nature.

When women are mentioned in Medieval Sufism, they normally appear as accompanying figures of more notable Sufi men. Most of the cases, depict women of exceptional religious devoutness (Dakake 2007; Sylvers 2010), what sometimes granted them the right to subvert social norms applicable to others, such as those of marriage (Ouguir 2020). For example, feminine practices such as pious weeping, could entail for a woman attaining unusual degrees of religious authority, as well as being freed from a number of gender expectations.¹ One such a devout woman was the 8th century Sha'wāna al-Uballa, who it is said that led mixed gender congregations in which the attendees would reach ecstasy through *samā'* (spiritual music) (Sylvers 2015, 24). There is also evidence of the existence of female religious scholars (Azad 2013) and of religious activity in the form of mixed gender religious gatherings both for worship and for the study of religious subjects (Sylvers 2015, 46) as well as women who travelled in the search for (religious) knowledge. Given that religious gathering and travelling was something more commonly done by Sufi men, there is also evidence of the negative scrutiny that surrounded those gatherings and of the harassment faced by female solo-travellers (Sylvers 2015, 60–70).

2 Gender and Mystical Love

One of the areas in which the ungendered nature of God and of the human soul have been called into question is in ideas about mystical love. All the practices

¹ Intense religious devoutness, such as that involved in pious weeping, has been considered in Islam a mystical practice, thence, its attributed relation to Sufism, although in many cases, the weepers may not be part to any established Sufi Order or might have belonged to a time in which they did not yet exist (Jones 2012).

of the Sufis are oriented towards one single goal, that is to reach a state of union with the divine, what is oftentimes expressed as divine or mystical love. The commonest expression of this form of love is as a union between the Sufi (God's seeker) and God in which the former is depicted as a female bride and the latter as male, whether the seeker is male (as in the majority of cases) or female (Dakake 2007). In other instances, albeit widely condemned by most of the tradition, Sufi literature refers to homosexual pederasty as a metaphor of the divine union in which God is manifested in the (considered divine) beauty of a young male (e.g. 'Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadhānī, d. 1131; Yūsuf bin Husayn, d. 916; or, Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī, d. 1238) (Abdel-Latif forthcoming).

3 Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya and Other Early Female Mystics (Seventh to Tenth Centuries)

Of the historical (or perhaps semi-legendary) figures that have made Sufism being commonly connected to a feminine religious devotion is Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya (d. 801 CE), also known as Rābi'a of Basra, one of the most important ones. A key figure among the founding ascetics of the Sufi tradition, she is well-known for her doctrine about love and is adored as the vivid image of pure religious devotion. This results from a story about her in which she was made free from slavery when her master saw a shining light stemming from her head, a proof of her Godly devotion and her unmediated relation with the divine. She is also often used to legitimise the use of music with religious purposes in Islam, something on which there has always been and still is a heated debate about. This is because in another story she is depicted as a morally loose woman who would make an earning singing in weddings (an activity typically considered lavish from a religious perspective) and that one day in her singing she found herself miraculous singing to Allah instead than to the newlywed, a moment that hallmarked her transformation from sin to piety and the beginning of her life as a mystic, at the relatively advanced age of thirty-six.²

There are however serious doubts on whether she (along with other early female mystics such as the Egyptian Dhū'n-Nūn al-Misrī, d. 859 CE) really existed. After all, all what we know about them come from hagiographical literature

2 The early orientalist Margaret Smith (2010) has one of the most comprehensive studies on Rabi'a and other female mystics; on Rabi'a, see also Ahmed (1992, 96–98).

that was produced about two centuries later.³ However, beyond the mere fact on whether these precise persons did or did not exist, we need to read the accounts as representations of devout women that develop idealised images of the feminine. For example, there is more accounts of devoutness of women who engaged in recurrent fasting and in intense, long-lasting praying sessions. What the literature thus seems to indicate is that women (or at least some women) engaged actively in religious practices. It also indicates that Islam in its ascetic variant, provided ideational frames for the conceptualisation of gender roles in society and of morality, and that religious literature served to convey the limits and possibilities of socially sanctioned behaviours.

4 Female Marginalisation in Sufi Orders and beyond

Once Sufism becomes a more established tradition and Sufi Orders (the religious institutions characteristic of Sufism) emerge around the eleventh century as a hallmark of this institutionalisation, we see women playing a more diverse (albeit still largely marginalized) role. However, most of the Sufi phenomena in which women have participated took place outside of institutional settings and not within the formal structure of Orders. Still there is some (even if scarce) evidence of women participating in the mostly androcentric world of institutionalised Sufism. For example, there is historical evidence of female-only shrines in the formative period of Sufi Orders, in places such as Aleppo, Baghdad and Mecca (Karamustafa 2007, 126). And, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there seem to be hints of wealthy women as being donors to Sufi shaykhs and to economically support their lodges, as well as of being recognised disciples of Sufi saints (De Nicola 2014). We find accounts of women such as Nizām Khātūn, who is said to have taken a role of authority, having been a disciple of the famous Sufi master, Rūmī, and who would not only attend but organise a session of Sufi music with her master and other disciples (De Nicola 2014, 154).

It is still very little what we know about these women, as most studies on the period have overlooked them, yet, for the little we know, sources mention them as receiving and imparting religious knowledge, being and having religious disciples (Ouguir 2020), participating in Sufi rituals and appearing as relatives of great Sufi

³ Three are the main authors worth mentioning in this regard, Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān Sulamī (d. 1021), Abū’l Qāsim ‘Abd al-Karīm b. Hawāzin al-Qushayrī (d. 1072) and Farīd ad-Dīn Muḥammad b. ‘Attar (d. 1221).

men, as enhancing their genealogical mystical credentials; this includes the role of being among those who have transmitted the stories that narrate the miracles of certain Sufi masters, events that are key in the authentication of the masters' mystical attributes (De Nicola 2014).

The accounts that depict females as being relevant to the Sufi tradition exist across time, yet, they need to be seen as having the relative importance they have within their contexts, and even if cases of Sufi women acting in different capacities become more recurrent over time, they still are a quite marginal part of the wider male-dominated religious tradition. It is however clear that once we get closer to modern times, their significance increases. Studies on modern Islam support the idea that in Sufism women have found a religious space they own (Dwyer 1978). We know that in modern times, women more often take female saints as role models of piety, in religious scholarship (Rory Dickson, Sharify-Funk and Shobhana Xavier 2018, 92) or as saintly figures other women venerate (Pemberton 2006). Women are habitually majority in shrines and have a central role in the catering and organization of religious events, sometimes being the sole organizers of festivities, they collect the money, prepare the food, invite, receive and cater for other pilgrims (Domínguez Díaz 2015). In modern times, Sufi groups and organizations have sometimes given Muslim women a degree of authority unseen in other Islamic communities. In this regard, remarkable are the examples of few religious organizations with no male counterpart, such as in the case of Syria's Qubaysiyya.

Today, Sufi women, as in the rest of groups of the revivalist spectrum, tend to have an active role in religious proselytization (*da'wā*), the organization of ritual gatherings, reading groups and other religious activities. On the other hand, it should be said that most Sufi orders and organizations follow a traditional understanding of gender, one in which the leadership is only attained by men, and women can just lead women – only congregations – in most cases, Sufi gatherings are gender segregated. Finding women in leadership positions is still a rarity (Birchok 2016). In general, Sufism does have a conservative view on gender and although the groups can be in this regard very diverse, there is plenty of Sufism's gender attitudes resembling those of other revival movements such as Salafism. Overall it seems fair to suggest that Sufism operates quite in line with the rest of the Islamic tradition, representing a part of that wider and very diverse religious phenomena, and not an oddity within it, as previously thought. The study of gender in Sufism is a good indication of how Islam, as a monotheistic religion serves societies to both reify and contest established social norms on the relations between men and women, yet, the degree of sexual and gender dissent within this religious tradition still represents a small proportion of the whole.

Bibliography

- Abdel-Latif, Sarah. (forthcoming). "Gender in Sufism." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ahmed, Leila. 1992. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven/CT: Yale University Press.
- Azad, Arezou. 2013. "Female Mystics in Mediaeval Islam: The Quiet Legacy." In *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 56, 53–88.
- Birchok, Daniel Andrew. 2016. "Women, Genealogical Inheritance and Sufi Authority: The Female Saints of Seunagan, Indonesia." In *Asian Studies Review* 40, 583–599.
- Dakake, Maria. 2007. "Guest of the Inmost Heart": Conceptions of the Divine Beloved Among Early Sufi Women." In *Comparative Islamic Studies* 3, 72–97.
- De Nicola, Bruno. 2014. "The Ladies of Rüm: A Hagiographic View of Women in Thirteenth-and Fourteenth-Century Anatolia." In *Sufi Studies* 3, 132–156.
- Domínguez Díaz, Marta. 2015. *Women in Sufism: Female Religiosities in a Transnational Order*. London; New York/NY: Routledge.
- Dwyer, Daisy Hilse. 1978. *Images and Self-Images: Male and Female in Morocco*. New York/NY: Columbia University Press.
- Holmes Katz, Marion. 2013. *Prayer in Islamic Thought and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, Linda, G. 2012. "He Cried and Made Others Cry: Crying as a Sign of Pietistic Authenticity or Deception in Medieval Islamic Preaching." In *Crying in the Middle Ages, Tears of History*, ed. by Eliina Gertsman, 132–165. London; New York/NY: Routledge.
- Karamustafa, Ahmet T. 2007. *Sufism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Knysh, Alexander. 2019. *Sufism: a New History of Islamic Mysticism*. Princeton/NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ouguir, Aziza. 2020. *Female Religious Agents in Morocco: Old Practices and New Perspectives*. Leiden; Boston/MA: Brill.
- Pemberton, Kelly. 2006. "Women Pirs, Saintly Succession, and Spiritual Guidance in South Asian Sufism." In *The Muslim World* 96, 61–87.
- Rory Dickson, William, Meena Sharify-Funk and Shobhana Xavier Merin. 2018. *Unveiling Sufism: From Manhattan to Mecca*. London; New York/NY: Routledge.
- Shaikh, Sa'diyya. 2012. *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality*. Chapel Hill/NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Silvers, Laury. 2010. "God Loves Me": the Theological Content and Context of Early Pious and Sufi Women's Sayings on Love." In *Islamic Studies* 30, 33–59.
- Silvers, Laury. 2015. "Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women." In *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, ed. by Lloyd Ridgeon, 24–52. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, Margaret. 2010 [1928]. *Rabī'a The Mystic and Her Fellow-Saints in Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Further Reading

- Elaroui Cornell, Rkia. 2019. *Rabi'a, from Narrative to Myth: The Many Faces of Islam's Most Famous Woman Saint*. London: Oneworld academic.
- Schimmel, Annemarie. 2003. *My Soul Is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

