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Female religious agents in Morocco: Old practices and new perspectives

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Chapter Two: Female Voices In Sufism

In order to discuss female Moroccan sainthood in Chapter Four, I first will explore some contexts. In this chapter, I will discuss Sufism more in depth, and go into its relation to gender. In chapter three, I will focus on the Moroccan characteristics of these issues, as well as on Moroccan hagiography.

Sufism, as was already indicated in Chapter One, has many strands. I concentrate therefore on what is the basis of all these strands, namely the basic principles of Sufism, as formulated by al-Ghazālī.⁶⁶ As a background for our study on women saints' construction of sainthood, I discuss the several stages of the spiritual path as discussed by this religious scholar. I will also briefly discuss the spaces of *ribāṭ*, *zāwiya* and *ṭṭarīqa*, stressing the relationship between them.

According to several authors there is gender neutrality in Sufism. To discuss this theme we will go into the works of some Sufi scholars of the past. We will also go into the broader movement of Islamic mysticism, to which Sufism belongs, and its rootedness in the sources of Islam, especially in the Qur'an. Authors like Leila Aḥmad, Amīna Wadud and Asma Barlas, have argued that the core of the Qur'an is its ethical Spirit, such as it is taken up in Islamic mysticism. Moreover, they have argued that the Spirit of the Qur'an is gender neutral or even egalitarian in character. Against this background, I discuss some examples of women mystics in Islamic history, in the concluding section of the chapter.

2-1 The Sufi Path to God

Sufism as a mystical dimension of Islam, has many strands, as I already discussed in Chapter One. Here I limit myself to the basis of Sufism, as formulated by Imām al-Ghazālī, the renowned 11th-century Persian scholar of religion, philosophy and Sufism and author of *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Reviving the Religious Sciences). After many years of employment at the famous College in Baghdad, he abandoned teaching the religious and legal sciences and dedicated the rest of his life to Sufism. Most Sufi scholars of the Islamic world include al-Ghazālī's work in their teachings and religious courses. His book, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, deals with *mu`āmalāt* (social acts that regulate relations among humans) and *'ibādāt* (spiritual acts that regulate relations between God and the believer). In other words, this book provides detailed teachings and instructions on spiritual acts and social interactions. In what follows I

⁶⁶ al-Ghazālī (no date)

base myself mainly on this book and on Schimmel's explanation of it in her *Mystical dimension of Islam* (1976).

In his chapter on mysticism, al-Ghazālī explains the meaning of Sufism, its principles and rules. According to him, there are different views and guidelines that were agreed upon by many Sufi scholars but criticized by others in the quest of spirituality. Al-Ghazālī stressed the importance of the human heart as a source of one's spiritual illumination. The heart plays the role of its holder's guide. This role, however, al-Ghazālī writes, emanates from ma`rifa (knowledge); the type of ma`rifa that al-Ghazālī stresses is knowledge of al-Anbiyā' wa al-Awliyā' (the knowledge of the prophets and Saints or friends of God) and ma`rifat `ulamā' and ḥukamā' (the knowledge of religious scholars and jurists). These two types of knowledge are important in the fulfillment of spiritual illumination because jurisprudence is acquired through one's senses; Sufism emanates from one's inner heart and prevails in the universal world. Thus, the purification of the heart and its tranquility emanates first from Islamic law, and then flourishes and gains a spiritual illumination from the inner knowledge of Islamic religion. If a Sufi, in al-Ghazālī's view, wants to be a gnostic (‘ārif bi-Allah), he must combine the outer and inner knowledge of Shari'a.

The attainment of exoteric and esoteric knowledge of Shari'a and of Sufism necessitates cultivating and embodying a number of qualities. These qualities, according to al-Ghazālī, encompass repentance (tawba), patience (ṣṣabr), gratitude (shukr), renunciation (zuhd), fear (khishya), hope (rajā'), contentment (riḍā), reliance on God (tawakkul) and love (ḥubb). These qualities pave the way for the Sufi to achieve spiritual illumination. Thus, the Sufi undertakes a number of procedures on his path to God. What exactly are the stages that the individual experiences while becoming pious and attaining sainthood?

From al-Ghazālī's approaches to mysticism, one understands that a Muslim mystic is required to undertake a "way" to reach God, in other words to become a wayfarer. The wayfarer (sālik), the individual who follows the path, engages in journeying toward God. On his way to God, he is exposed to different stages that he has to experience before reaching the final station of finally meeting God. But before the mystic enters the path to God and experiences the different stages and states of the spiritual path, he has to embrace the guidelines of the Islamic law. The conditions for entering the path of Sufism comprise three important elements, which are Shari'a, ṭṭarīqa and ḥaqīqa. The Shari'a refers to the Islamic law and its guidelines that a mystic must learn and follow faithfully. The ṭṭarīqa (the path) on which the Sufi walks emanates from Shari'a. The wayfarer proceeds from one stage to another by performing strict regimens of behavior and maintain challenging daily schedules

until he reaches God's closeness. Finally, ḥaqīqa is the truth that the mystic experiences in the final and enduring stage of his path. Schimmel refers to the Prophet's explanation of this tripartite way to God in the following words: "the Sharī'a are my words [aqwālī], the ṭṭarīqa [a'mālī], and ḥaqīqa are my interior states [ʾaḥwālī]."⁶⁷ Sharī'a, ṭṭarīqa and ḥaqīqa thus are interdependent and essential to the achievement of God's proximity.

This tripartite way to God guides the wayfarer's experiences on his path through different stages/stations [maqām = station] and states [ḥāl =state].⁶⁸ According to Schimmel, the state is God's gift that God bestows on his mystic without an exertion of efforts.⁶⁹ Whereas, the station is in particular the final and enduring stage on the path to God that requires very long and hard efforts to achieve. Thus, the stations are achieved through the performance of acts and efforts, but the states are bestowed as gifts of grace on mystics.⁷⁰

On his path to God the wayfarer, who is also referred to as disciple or adept (murīd), needs a guide, known as a shaykh or murshid (spiritual master) to guide him through the different stages of the Sufī path. The disciple must diligently follow the guide's instructions in order to reach proximity to and union with the Divine. The spiritual master offers the necessary advice to train the murīd and enable him to undertake the required exercises and perform the requisite practices on the path to God.⁷¹ He teaches adepts the way to become pious and even saintly. He tests the adept's desire by treating him sometimes very harshly. Schimmel says:

The newcomer was sometimes made to wait for days at the sheikh's door, and sometimes as a first test was treated very rudely. Usually three years of service were required before the adept could be formally accepted in a master's group—one year in the service of the people, one in the service of God, and one in watching over his own heart.⁷²

The shaykh's aim is to test whether the murid can endure the challenges of the path.

The relationship between the shaykh and the murid is characterized by three important elements. The khirqā (mantle of initiation) constitutes the first mark of the murid's relationship to the shaykh. It is offered to the disciple as a token of his successful entry into

⁶⁷ Schimmel 1975, 99

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Jellab 1995; see also Hammoudi 1997

⁷² Schimmel, 1975, 101

the Sufi lifestyle and progress toward piety. It is bestowed on the murīd if the master feels that he is worthy of permission to proceed on the path. It indicates the murīd's mastery of piety and spirituality and his success in renouncing worldliness and material desires. It is a gift that is offered by the guide to the disciple commemorating his spiritual progress.⁷³

It is enhanced by the second aspect of their relationship, which is *ṣuḥba* (company or companionship). The disciple establishes a strong relationship of love, trust and respect with the guide. The shaykh guides the disciple's piety on the righteous path and helps him to reach the higher stages of spirituality and to give birth to a strong pious personality. This is made possible through the shaykh's continuous and constant monitoring of the disciple's expressions of piety, particularly during periods when the disciple is assigned to meditate on the Divine.

The disciple is expected to undertake a retreat during which he confines himself for at least forty days to a dark room or *ribāt*, or another isolated space, in order to contemplate God. During this period the shaykh observes the disciple's actions, performances, visions and dreams. The disciple must maintain a strong attachment to his guide. This attachment enables him to undertake transformations that are not otherwise possible. In seclusion, the disciple undergoes changes at the emotional level. He trains his emotions to renounce the material worlds and seek spirituality.⁷⁴ The disciple spends years serving his master and learning from him all the guidelines for achieving sainthood. Education is another aspect of the shaykh's relationship with the disciple. The education process starts with reciting and memorizing chapters of the Qur'an. It also includes the study of *fiqh* and other Islamic sciences.⁷⁵ Thus, the role of the spiritual master is to initiate, guide and educate the disciple.

Compared to the usual understanding based on the works of al-Ghazālī, the mystical path, which is described as a ladder that a *sālik* climbs to reach Divine proximity is sometimes envisioned in other ways. One way is referred to as *al-Jadh* (Divine attraction), and the person pursuing it⁷⁶ is called *majdhūb* or "the attracted one," according to Schimmel. The *majdhūb* feels attracted to God and so lost in union with Him that he behaves in ways that contradict conventional norms.⁷⁷ The *majdhūb* has no spiritual guide, but instead is guided by God. Other mystics also engage in the Sufi path without a guide or a formal initiation. They take the spirits of dead saints and spiritual masters as guides on their path. They believe that

⁷³ Skali 2007, 47; Dialmy 2008; Schimmel 1975, 102

⁷⁴ Skali 2007, 48; Dialmy 2008, 259-60; Schimmel 1975, 105

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ See the introductory chapter

⁷⁷ Kugle 2007

the spirits of their favorite saints are still alive and able to orient actively their followers and admirers. Similarly the angel al-Khiḍr, who oriented the Prophets' Divine missions⁷⁸ guides some mystics and Sufis. Many saints such as Ibn 'Arabi, were guided by al-Khiḍr and they received their khirqā from him.⁷⁹ Hence, the mystical path includes different strategies to follow to reach Divine union.

What exactly are the stages and stations that the wayfarer undertakes on the path to God? What are the properties of each stage and the conditions required from the mystic to experience the stages of the spiritual path, and how does the wayfarer endeavor to attain them?

Repentance (tawba) is the first stage of the path that the mystic experiences. Tawba means to turn away from sins.⁸⁰ It also means to regret something done in the past.⁸¹ It is a feeling that is suddenly arisen inside the individual to give up the one's actions one considers to be sinful. This feeling emerges inside one's inner being through different events, be it a listening to a Quranic recitation, having a vision, attending a religious lecture or meeting a saintly person, or simply fear of being punished. Repentance makes the Muslim reconsider his actions and deeds. Al-Ghazālī defines tawba in terms of turning away from committing sins.⁸² Tawba is the beginning of the sālik's path, thus the first step of the murīd.⁸³ It is a regret for all the wrong deeds that the individual committed and from which one seeks to free himself.⁸⁴ The murīd is obliged to express his tawba through the performance of different actions.

Another stage of the Sufī path is zuhd (asceticism). The latter is understood as the renunciation of worldliness. That is, the ascetic gives up the world and its material pleasures and all that distracts the heart materially.⁸⁵ The ascetics usually confine themselves in isolated spaces (rooms, caves) where they train themselves to hard Sufi life and non material pleasures. Their zuhd is clear in their renunciation of worldliness and all what contradicts the Islamic law. For this reason, they sometimes are found serving people and fighting injustice and ill behaviors of people who do not respect the doctrines of the Shari'a.⁸⁶ The ascetic here is striving to guide himself and other people to the way of the Truth, salvation and

⁷⁸ See Quran Sūra 8

⁷⁹ Schimmel 1975, 106

⁸⁰ Ibn Manẓūr (no date)

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² al-Ghazālī (no date), vol. 3, 3

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Schimmel 1975, 113

redemption. He continuously struggles against his and other people's worldly ambitions that blind Man from reaching the ḥaqīqa (the true reality, also known as fana' or self-annihilation or absorption).⁸⁷ This is an essential stage in the murīd's endeavors to train and educate his nafs (self) to see the light. The Qur'an⁸⁸ classifies the self invaded by material desires and egoistic tendencies as al-Nafs al-Ammāra bi al-Sū' (the self/soul that incites to evil). It is the negative self that ignores the Divine part that God offers it and becomes blind towards God. For the protection of the Divine aspect of the Sufi's inner side, the Sufi indulges himself in the education of his spiritual self and changes the evil self into al-Nafs al-Lawwāma (blaming soul) and strive to achieve al-Nafs al-Muṭma'inna (the peaceful soul).⁸⁹ Nafs struggles against the material desires and evil temptations to reach the stage of illumination and full knowledge of God.

In a next stage, the mystic starts to guide his heart as its needs to be directed only to God. In his chapter on the heart, al-Ghazālī refers to the importance of the training of the heart which he calls the centre of the individual spiritual orientation so as to keep its pure divine image.⁹⁰ This training of the self rescues it from dissident inclinations and preserves its spiritual illumination. In this stage the mystic engages in active worship of God.

Another stage of the path is patience (ṣṣabr) and gratitude. Patience is defined in terms of the mystic's efforts to stand by the afflictions and the hardships of the path and to accept God's will either good or bad.⁹¹ He bears all what goes against his material needs for the sake of God's closeness.⁹² The mystic's ṣṣabr promotes him to receive God's gift, divine grace for which the mystic has to express thanks and gratitude (shukr). This does not mean that the mystic expresses gratitude to God only when he is rewarded a gift from the Divine. Rather, the mystic has always to thank God whether his wishes, desires and needs are fulfilled or not.⁹³ This means that the mystic has to be in a state of happiness and joy and makes his heart happy despite the bitter conditions it experiences. This is what is called (riḍa), meaning "the joy of the heart in the bitterness of the Divine decree."⁹⁴ Despite the hard conditions of the mystic's life, the mystic has to show satisfaction and gratitude to the Lord. Thus, the Sufi here becomes a lover whose love for God is not made for a reward but for God Himself.

In Sufism, love constitutes an important component in the mystic's relationship with

⁸⁷ al-Ghazālī (no date), vol. 3, 6

⁸⁸ Qur'an Sura 12, 53

⁸⁹ Qur'an Sura 75, 2

⁹⁰ al-Ghazālī (no date), vol. 4, 3

⁹¹ Ibn Manẓūr (no date)

⁹² Schimmel 1975, 125

⁹³ Ibid., 131

⁹⁴ Ibid., 126

God. Schimmel refers to the Prophet's emphasis on the importance of love (maḥaba) in the establishment of the relationship with God, in the following prayer: "O God, give me love Thee, and love of those who love Thee, and love of what makes me approach Thy love, and make Thy love dear to me than cool water."⁹⁵ The love of God is very important for the mystic because it enables him to become more obedient to the Beloved's rules and orders. Love, then, enables the mystic to deeply contemplate His beloved and His greatness.

The mystic's love for God is expressed by different terminologies according to the degree of the mystic's feelings for the Divine. The gnostic (al-ʿārif bi Allāh) is the advanced mystic who achieves the knowledge of God and intimacy with Him. This shows that the mystic has to know God first before he loves Him. Knowledge here precedes love and passion. Mystics get so involved with God that a strong intimate relationship with Him is founded. This deep love relation makes the mystic feel God's company in his loneliness.⁹⁶

This closeness is displayed by the term qurb, meaning proximity. To attain this, the mystic also engages in the performance of farāʾid (the punctual performance of Quranic instructions) and nawāfil (supererogative and additional performances of worship).⁹⁷ At this stage, the mystic sees God alone in all that he contemplates and at the same time he feels a total and ecstatic sense of His presence and proximity.⁹⁸

Self-annihilation constitutes another stage of the Sufi path. Fanāʾ means annihilation or absorption in God. It also signifies the annihilation of the attributes of human nature and their transformation into Divine attributes.⁹⁹ The mystic engages in mysticism and diligence on his path to reach Divine union and annihilate himself. In the state of annihilation, the mystic is completely immersed in the contemplation of the attributes of God and is oblivious to his own self. Annihilation enables the Sufi to become united with the Divine.¹⁰⁰

On the Sufi path, one can distinguish several types of embodiment. Before the Muslim engages in the path, he has a sensual and procreative body. It is a body that is totally submitted to al-Nafs al-Ammāra bi al-Sūʾ that guides the body to worldliness. At this stage the sexual function of the body is highly stressed. To free the body from material orientation, it chooses to practice some religious rituals. But the body needs to go further to listen to the blames of al-Nafs al-Lawwāma (the blaming soul) to achieve al-Nafs al-Muṭmaʾinna (the peaceful soul). The latter imposes on the Muslim body to renounce worldliness and to

⁹⁵ Schimmel 1975, 131

⁹⁶ Ibid., 133; Dialmy 2008; Skali 2007

⁹⁷ Schimmel 1975, 132-33

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 132

¹⁰⁰ Dialmy 2008

reconsider his inner spiritual desires and to assure the success of the soul over the body. At this stage, the Muslim decides to become a Sufi who is determined to commit himself to the path not only of purification, but of meeting the Divine. Then the body ignores its sexual identity and becomes to be known by another new identity, which is Divine love.¹⁰¹

This taming of the self is achieved through the performance of rituals and/or self-techniques. Mystics have chosen fasting as a way to inhibit the evil soul and reach God. Sufis fast days and days, training themselves to resist hunger, as a way to approach God's piety and religious merits.¹⁰² Sleeplessness is another self-technique that the mystic performs to be with God. He spends the night worshipping the Divine, expressing his desire for God by weeping and crying, thus seeking God's revelation and God's enlightenment.¹⁰³ Most of the mystics consider hunger and lack of sleep as important means to achieve spiritual progress.

Another important ritual is prayer (*ṣalāt*), which constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam. The Muslim performs five prayers per day in addition to other optional prayers. Praying has an important role in one's piety and spirituality. It is seen as the key to paradise because it guides one's actions and performances. It offers the mystic the opportunity to live God's closeness and proximity. It is a form of ascension to God (*mi'rāj*).¹⁰⁴ Hagiographical literature is filled with stories about Sufis and mystics indulging in ritual praying. Through prayer and dhikr the mystic feels as if he is in a direct contact with the Divine and His sacred universe.¹⁰⁵

Dhikr (the remembrance of God) is another ritual of Sufism. It is highly stressed in the Qur'an. It is a technique which consists of remembering and praising God and the Prophet either silently or loudly. Dhikr is an important means through which the mystic reaches God and lives His closeness. Dhikr's sessions are highly appreciated in different *zāwiyas* where the shaykhs compose different collections of religious texts or formulae called "wird" to recite in their gatherings with the *murīds*. In the performance of the dhikr ritual, the devotees repeat the names of God and the Prophets until they collapse in a state of trance.

These different rituals are highly approved by orthodox as well as popular Sufism. The latter also includes other rituals that are related to the local culture. *Al-ḥadra* is also a dhikr ritual that is performed loudly. It is a loud dhikr which brings a larger group into of state of asceticism. The rhythmical repetition of the names of God, the Prophet and saints

¹⁰¹ Dialmy 2008, 261

¹⁰² Schimmel 1975, 117. See also al-Ghazālī (no date), vol. 3, 3

¹⁰³ Schimmel 1975, 117

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 148

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

brings about state of trance. It is usually performed within gatherings of people either in zāwiyas, shrines or other spaces.

2-2 Ribāt, Zāwiya and ṭṭarīqa

Saints built ribāt, or spaces designated, on the one hand, for prayer and the worship of God, and for preparing pious people for holy war against the enemies of Islam on the other hand.¹⁰⁶ Sufīs and saints founded, in the course of time, “ribāt” which came to be called a zāwiya. This word emanates from the root “zawā” meaning to gather in a corner to pray.¹⁰⁷

Zāwiya, then, is a word used in North Africa to indicate a religious centre where Sufīs meet to live their religious rituals. In other parts in the world such as the Middle East, we find other words for zāwiya like “Khānqā”.¹⁰⁸ Zāwiya is religious hospice or religious centre founded by a spiritual master to disseminate Islam, to mediate personal conflicts, to help the poor and to bestow baraka on the followers of the saint.



Lalla Aziza's zawiya in the Atlas Morocco

There is a relationship between zāwiya and ṭṭarīqa. zāwiya belongs officially to a particular ṭṭarīqa. Saints' followers, murīds and admirers organized Sufi communities called ṭṭarīqa. The latter has two meanings. It is both a “way” to live a religion and piety, and it is also an organization.¹⁰⁹ Ṭṭarīqa is the organizational institution where the saint or the spiritual

¹⁰⁶ Miftāh 1981, 26

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 31

¹⁰⁸ Schimmel 1975

¹⁰⁹ Kugle 2007, 6

¹⁰⁹ Viktor 2000

master educates his murids and disciples. A ṭṭarīqa also involves the perpetuation of the founder's method of practicing mysticism and religious knowledge,¹¹⁰ and is therefore often named after its founder. It is a Sufi lineage which transmits the mystical knowledge of the saints through a chain of saints to other followers and murīds, who seek a state of holiness and religious uprightness. It is also a space where the founder of the ṭṭarīqa is venerated after his death.

The veneration of saints which takes the form of continuous visits to the saint's shrine, the organization of festivals are other examples of popular rituals that the pilgrims perform in the hope of receiving the holy grace from dead saints. These popular rituals involve a dynamic interaction between orthodox textual religion and local cultural practices.

After having explored these general characteristics of Sufism, I now will discuss Sufism in its relation to gender.



Zāwiya al-Isāwiyya in Meknes

2-3 Sufism in Relation to Gender

From the grammar in our discussion above of the Sufi path to the Divine, it may seem that only men were addressed as subjects of piety. However, we have also seen that the Sufi disciple has to abstain from any sexual dimension, which is a first indication that we are dealing here with an ideal of gender neutrality.¹¹¹

The religious scholar Ibn ‘Arabi (the 12th century) made it very clear that women are included in the practice of Sufism. He explicitly states that women can reach the highest

¹¹⁰ Kugle 2007

¹¹¹ As will be further discussed in the next chapters.

stages of Sufism. Ibn ‘Arabi thus believes in women’s abilities to achieve a strong piety and to become a gnostic and part of ‘abdāl, the highest stage of sainthood and mysticism. According to him all the positions in Sufism, including those of Quṭb and ‘Awtād, are accessible to women. Ibn ‘Arabi’s elucidation of Sufism as a space where gender equality is highly visible is clear in the passage of his book where he describes the different types of sainthood that he derives from the Qur’an (Sura al-aḥzāb). He continuously includes women as part of religious courses and practices. He says: “In each of these categories which we are speaking of there are men and women... there is no spiritual qualification conferred on men which is denied to women.”¹¹² Some other names in this respect are Ibn Taymiya (14th century) who met a Sufi woman called Ummu Zaynab Fāṭima bint ‘Abbās al-Baghdādiyya whom he introduces in his work not only as a spiritual leader of the ribāṭ al-Baghdādiyya but also as a jurist (faqīha) and muftiya (preacher). He explicitly approves of her performing sermons and of her religious leadership.¹¹³ ‘Abd Raḥmān Sulamī (10th century) and Farīd al-dīn ‘Aṭṭār (12th century) are other religious scholars who stress women’s role in Sufism.¹¹⁴ Al-Tādilī, one of the Moroccan spiritual masters of the 12th century, and al-Jazūlī, another Moroccan spiritual master from the 16th century, both include women as Sufis, and believe in women’s ability to achieve the highest stages of piety.

The Sufi scholar Ibn ‘Arabi who believed that the Qur’anic virtues are accessible to both men and women, consistently adds the phrase *min al-Rijāl wa al-Nisā’* (including men and women) in his discussion of all saintly categories. Other Sufi spiritual masters like al-‘Aṭṭār, Ibn Taymiya and Sulamī (1999) coined words and expressions such as “rijāl” (actors) to refer to concrete men and women as actors of Sufism and religion. Al-Tādilī is continuously repeating the expression “he or she was among the people of religious learning and practice” (*kāna/ [kāna- t] min ahl al-‘ilm wa al-‘amal*).¹¹⁵ Thus, these scholarly Sufis included Sufi women in their compilations. They eliminated gender in their discussion of spiritual perfection. In as far as these male Sufis and spiritual masters refer to the Qur’anic discourse for their including of women, and their belief that the Qur’anic virtues are accessible to both men and women, they are implicitly understanding the Qur’an, as egalitarian in character.

¹¹² Ibn ‘Arabī 1985, vol. 2, 35

¹¹³ Shaikh 2009

¹¹⁴ ‘Aṭṭār 1966

¹¹⁵ al-Tādilī 1997, 22

Sa'diya Shaikh (2009) argues that these male Sufis created symbolic language to implicitly criticize the “dominant patriarchal concepts of gender within Muslim legacy.”¹¹⁶ According to her, the Sufis are conscious of the dominant fiqh that marginalized the Qur'anic gender justice. The Sufis' advocacy of equal spiritual capacities suggests that they were implicitly criticizing communities where such equality was not approved. Shaikh contends:

The Sufi narratives discussed are not dense theoretical treatises on gender. Nevertheless, they are sophisticated articulations of Sufi principles in ways that interrogate gender-based constructs at a foundational level. They assertively challenge gender-biased formulations on the nature of self and submission in Islam.¹¹⁷

Thus, contemporary scholars like Shaikh also contend that there is no distinction between men and women in the practice of Sufism. We focus here on these voices that are quite prominent in this area of research today. Shaikh (2009) states that patriarchy and patriarchal discourses, which existed in different societies, were responsible for many limitations placed on women's practice of religion. However, Shaikh argues, Sufi doctrine and practices were more open to women since they focus on the individual's inner state and not on his/her physical side.¹¹⁸ They endow the inner side, with great significance. Shaikh writes:

The diminished significance of gender identity on the path is related to the great priority Sufism accords to the individual's inner state. In some cases, Sufi practices have subverted traditional patriarchal religious anthropology in ways that might provide contemporary Muslims with creative sources to expand the paradigm for gender justice in their societies.¹¹⁹

Sufi practices, in Shaikh's opinion, have served as a means to subvert the patriarchal ideologies existing in the dominant discourses of traditional societies, as these Sufi practices incorporate gender justice and equality. Shaikh notes a number of reasons why Sufism is gender egalitarian:

First, there is a full recognition of the equal agency, ability, and value of men and women who alike can realize the ultimate goals of their religion. Secondly,

¹¹⁶ Shaikh 2009, 18

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

the varying dynamics of personality and psychology, the “greater jihād” against the al-nafs al-ammāra, and the discipline necessary for the purification of the heart, are all ungendered and apply equally to men and women. Thirdly, on the path of submission to God, a human being should be wary of all claims of social superiority, including those based on gender difference. These claims are seen to be potential traps set by the al-nafs al-ammāra, able to lead a person to spiritual destruction. Fourthly, in relation to gender, ontological equality informs social equality.¹²⁰

Shaikh’s argument regarding the ideals of Sufism and its relation to gender equality is primarily based on Ibn ‘Arabi’s views. She underscores his conception of Sufi women as heroines of spirituality and chivalry. Ibn ‘Arabi, Shaikh asserts, blames fuqaha (religious jurists) for interpreting Sufism and Islam in androcentric and patriarchal ways, stressing women’s subordination and marginalization and making these processes appear intrinsic to Islam.¹²¹

Another scholar, the Moroccan sociologist Abdessamad Dialmy,¹²² likewise argues that Sufism constitutes a space where gender difference is substantially disregarded. He elucidates that the Sufi body’s physicality melts while the Sufi is navigating in the realm of spirituality. The Sufi body becomes free and emancipated from its gendered physical difference and sexual procreative functions. Thus, sexual and physical differences have no significance in the Sufi tradition. Dialmy writes:

Les deux premiers stades représentent une illustration de la différence sexuelle, un moment d’opposition entre le féminin et le masculin, tandis que [le dernier stade] est l’espace où l’homme et la femme soufis se dépassent au point de ne plus pouvoir se définir par le sexe. A [ce] stade, la différence sexuelle n’a aucune pertinence, et le Soufisme se pose ici comme une théorie Islamique de l’égalité des sexes.¹²³

Schimmel as well, in her book *The Mystical Dimension of Islam*, contends that Sufism includes men and women. She refers to a number of women who played a role in Sufism in

¹²⁰ Ibid., 37

¹²¹ Shaikh draws on Rita Gross’ book, *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (1993). Gross calls for a feminist revalorization of the history of Buddhism to uncover the Buddhist female voices, which androcentric culture concealed. To do so, Gross calls on scholars to return to the past, to explore historical Buddhist ‘feminist’ ideals that empowered rather than disempowered women.

¹²² Dialmy 2008, 259-61

¹²³ Ibid.

the second appendix of her book. Kugle, in his work *Sufis and Saints' Bodies* (2007), explicitly argues that many male Sufis do not take into account, neither on a principle nor on a practical level, gender as stressed in the doctrine of fiqh, since they consider gender as not important.

According to these scholars, gender neutrality is a basic presumption of Sufism. To further discuss the relation of Sufism and gender, we have to take into account that Sufism is part of a broader movement of Islamic mysticism, which finds its basis in readings of the Qur'an that emphasize its spiritual core. Interestingly, several contemporary authors have once more emphasized this spiritual side of Islam, such as to be found in the ethical message of the Qur'an, discussing it in terms of gender equality like the Sufi masters implicitly did long before them. I will briefly go into their arguments so as to more fully sketch the Islamic contexts of female mystics in general and of women Sufis in particular. In what follows I will discuss the works of Leila Ahmed (1992), Amīna Wadud (1993) and Asma Barlas (2002), who all emphasize the spiritual message of the Qur'an in its egalitarian dimensions.

In her influential book *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1993) Wadud studies the Qur'an from a gender perspective. She explores the way woman's position is portrayed in the Qur'an. The Qur'an according to Wadud, does not justify any oppression of women. Wadud discusses different themes. She argues that God in the creation of humankind does not distinguish between man and woman.¹²⁴ The Qur'an presents both men and women as created from the same nafs. The Qur'an does not make any difference in this respect between men and women, unlike Bible which says that Eve was created from Adam's rib. Wadud also discusses some examples of women mentioned in the Qur'an, such as Maryam, which highlight Muslim women's active and exemplary role in Islamic society. She also explores the Qur'an's portrayal of man and woman in regard to the hereafter. The Qur'an addresses the position of the individual in the hereafter not in terms of gender but in terms of the individual's actions and faith. The only distinction the Qur'an makes is on the basis of taqwa (piety) of the person. As Wadud argues the Qur'an explicitly addresses men and women to participate in the practice of religion. God says:

Lo! men who surrender unto Allah, and women who surrender, and men who believe and women who believe, and men who obey and women who obey, and men who speak the truth and women who speak the truth, and men who persevere (in righteousness) and

¹²⁴ Shaikh 2009, 18

women who persevere, and men who are humble and women who are humble, and men who give alms and women who give alms, and men who fast and women who fast, and men who guard their modesty and women who guard (their modesty), and men who remember Allah much and women who remember - Allah hath prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward.¹²⁵

God says again:

Whoever does righteousness, be it male or female and he is a believer, then indeed We will definitely recompense them their reward, according to the fairest of whatever they were doing.¹²⁶

These Qur'anic verses show that the practice of religion is available to men and women. The Qur'an refers to Muslimāt and Muslimūn (Muslim men and Muslim women), Mu'mināt and Mu'minūn (the faithful men and faithful women). No restriction has been placed on women to acquire religious knowledge and to perform religious roles. Thus Wadud stresses that her egalitarian reading of the Qur'an does justice to the real spirit of the Qur'an. Men's leadership and women's obedience are not Islamic but cultural constructs. Muslim women's oppression and backwardness is due to patriarchal interpretations of the original sources of Islam, especially the Qur'an, in the centuries following the death of the Prophet. Women since then are discriminated, and not considered as being on the same level as male believers. Islam since then, Wadud argues, is used as an instrument to restrict woman's function in society and to make her inferior to her male counterpart. Thus, a rereading of the Qur'an, preferably by women themselves, is also important in fighting patriarchy.

Likewise Barlas, in her book *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (2002), studies the way equality is displayed in the Qur'an. Throughout her study, Barlas argues that the Qur'an does not present men as superior to women. Rather, the Qur'an stresses that man and woman are equal because they are both created from a single self (nafs). The Qur'an distinguishes between people only, on the basis of praxis, which means faith and the practice of Qur'anic instructions. The Qur'an is not patriarchal in character and does not approve the implementation of any patriarchal rule on earth.

Ahmed in her book *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) argues in similar ways. The original ethical message of the Qur'an is egalitarian in character, in contrast to what has been

¹²⁵ Quran Sūra al-Aḥzāb, 34

¹²⁶ Quran Sūra al-Naḥl, 96

made of it in later centuries. Ahmed too contends that women's subordination stems not from Islam but from patriarchal local cultures.

These new voices of believing Muslim women, who argue for a reinterpretation of the Qur'an as a book in which women are seen as equals, have inspired many Muslim women today to turn to the Qur'an and start reading the texts themselves. A precise evaluation of their arguments exceeds the scope of my research. However, from their arguments we can conclude that gender egalitarianism is not external to Islam. The works mentioned argue for intrinsic gender equality in the heart of Islam, like some Sufi scholars implied in their works.

2-4 Women's Mysticism in Islamic History

Wadud discusses several stories in the Qur'an on women who, as she argues, are presented as great examples of piety. Regarding the story of Maryam, we can add to Wadud's findings that in the Sufi literature, Maryam is taken as a symbol of the mystic's love and strong attachment to God who becomes pregnant with the Divine light. Another woman mentioned in the Qur'an is Asiya, Pharaoh's wife, who prayed God to save her from Pharaoh's injustice and build her a house in paradise close to the Divine: in this respect she can be considered a mystic woman. In Sura 12 of the Qur'an, another woman comes forward, who is referred to as the maid of the governor of Egypt (imra'at 'aziz miṣr). This woman fell in love with the Prophet, Joseph. Her love for him was a symbol for God. Her strong love for God made her lose her mind and walk on the streets in search of her beloved. Her story has become a symbol of the soul which engages in the Sufi path of poverty and love.¹²⁷ Schimmel (1975) includes her in her list of female mystics because this woman totally devoted herself to the Divine.¹²⁸

The authors above discussed the Qur'an's egalitarianism, and did not go into the Hadith at length, nor will I, since this is a topic that exceeds the limits of my studies even further. I will only limit myself to a brief mentioning of several references in the Hadith to women experiencing mysticism during the Prophet's life. In this context, I mention the Prophet Mohammad's saying to Khadija¹²⁹ that the angel Gabriel (Jibrīl) sent her his greetings and promised her a house in paradise.¹³⁰ In the Sufi literature, Khadija is the first woman who experienced the mystical state that the Prophet lived during the first stages of the

¹²⁷ Schimmel 1975; Cornell 1998

¹²⁸ Schimmel 1975, 434

¹²⁹ Khadija is the first wife of the Prophet.

¹³⁰ al-'Abbādī 2004, 2

Islamic Divine revelations.¹³¹ It is she who sustained and comforted the Prophet when he first met the angel Jibrīl. She lived with the Prophet at the time of his first mystical states, and she was the first woman who practiced religion with the Prophet and remained by his side.¹³² Being the first faithful woman to the Prophet's Divine mission, Khadīja was promised a place in Paradise, as well as Fāṭima (the Prophet Muhammad's daughter).¹³³ Khadīja, then, is often seen as the pioneer of female sacredness and as the first who opened the door for other Muslim women to enter the world of piety and sacredness.

Likewise, the Prophet's daughter Fāṭima became one of the greatest pious women in the Islamic world. She was the only daughter of the Prophet and the only woman who inherited the Prophet's sacredness, as comes forward from the following ḥadīth: "Fāṭima is part of me, whoever makes her angry makes me angry too".¹³⁴ In another ḥadīth, the Prophet said to Fāṭima when he found her ill because she found nothing to eat: "Oh daughter! Don't you want to be the lady of all women?" She said: "Oh father, what about Maryam, the daughter of 'Imrān?" the Prophet replied: "She was the lady of her time, and you are the lady of your time".¹³⁵ `Āyisha was also a spiritual woman who was involved in the Prophet's Divine revelations: she is reported to have seen the Prophet in the company of the angel, Jibrīl (Gabriel)¹³⁶. These exemplary pious women were heroines of stories that both written and oral archives contain. They show that the fundamental texts of Islam record the lives of men as well as of women whose piety lifted them to a heightened position.

Finally we will have a look at the role of some women mystics in the history of Islam. Islamic history is pregnant with instances of women who played a role in their societies. It is full of instances of women's scholarship and religious agency. There are also women who engaged in the Sufi path and reached the highest stages of piety and spirituality and gained power and authority. I will refer below to some examples.

Islamic history contains a number of other Sufi women¹³⁷ who marked the Sufi world through their strong piety and religious knowledge, such as Fāṭima of Nishapur, and Fāṭima of Cordova who succeeded in becoming Islamic leaders who participated in the education of renowned male Sufis. This is the case of Fāṭima of Cordova whose strong piety and sainthood is reported to have bestowed youthfulness on her despite her old age. Her strong spirituality is

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Kaḥḥāla 1982

¹³³ al-Banī 1988, 338

¹³⁴ al-Bukhārī wa Muslim 2007, vol. 3, 1361

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Skali 2007, 130

¹³⁷ See Chapter Four.

said to have endowed her with a Divine beauty. Ibn ‘Arabi acknowledged that her divine beauty oriented his spirituality and made him perceive the Divine through the medium of a woman. She used to tell him: “I am your spiritual mother and the light of your bodily mother”.¹³⁸ Her strong piety pushed Ibn ‘Arabi to consider the strategy to become a gnostic and to be in the right path to God. Fāṭima of Cordova thus was Ibn ‘Arabi’s Shaykh, who taught him how to become close the Divine.¹³⁹ Schimmel concludes that women for Ibn ‘Arabi, reveal “the secret of the compassionate God”.¹⁴⁰

Bayazid Bestami (8th century), a known spiritual master, also refers to a saintly woman whom he encountered in the desert and whom he considered as his spiritual master. It is true that in his entry, Bestami’s hagiographer did not give a detailed description of the role this woman played in the Bestami’s spirituality, but one understands from his approval of her as his spiritual guide who guided his piety and spirituality that she masters him.¹⁴¹

In modern times some women carry on what their pious and spiritual mothers started throughout Islamic religious history. They are genuine religious agents as will be shown in following chapters. Modernity and education allow women to have more access not only to Sufism but also to orthodox Islam. This point is going to be discussed in Chapter Five and Six of this thesis.

2-5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed various views of Islamic mysticism from a gender perspective, one of them being that Sufism as articulated in the primary sources is gender neutral. Sufism is a spiritual dimension that combines the outer and the inner aspects of Islamic religion. Sufism’s emphasis is on the heart, and the purification of the heart cannot be achieved without the knowledge of Islamic law. Sufism, as it is presented in the primary texts, stresses the inner side of the Sufi’s personality rather than his/her gender, and includes women as well as men. Similarly, we have seen several discussions of the Qur’anic message from a gender perspective from which we can conclude that Sufism reflects the heart of Islam, in as far as it invites the Sufis whether males or females to achieve the spiritual aspiration that enables them to be with the Divine.

Moreover, women’s religious participation is highly visible in Sufism in comparison

¹³⁸ Ibn ‘Arabī 1985, vol. 3, 89

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Schimmel 1975, 243

¹⁴¹ Helminsky 2003, xxi

to that in orthodox Islam. Sufism also encompasses what is referred to as popular religion that opened its door for women who were marginalized by orthodox religious institutions. It enhanced women to express their religious desires and to construct religious personhood.¹⁴²

In the next chapter we will focus on Moroccan Sufism. How did women construct Sufi personalities in this context? Did they follow the guidelines of Sufism discussed in this chapter to construct sainthood?

¹⁴² Ferhat 2001; Zouanat 2009