

Women in Sufism

Rukhsar Hussain

English, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland

Email: Rukhsar.hussain@strath.ac.uk

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The following paper will explore women participation in the Sufism movement. Sufism is a mystical movement which is often limited to Islam, but such an understanding of this movement makes it narrow. Though the roots of Sufism may be found in Islam, it goes far beyond set boundaries. This tradition “represents one of the most complete and well-preserved metaphysical and esoteric traditions that has survived in the modern world” (Nasr 1972), and women have been a vital part of it from the very beginning. However, they have been silenced and almost made non-existent in the patriarchal narratives that are present regarding this movement. In this paper, I aim to explore the accounts of women saints that have survived over all these years as they strikingly hint towards their role in Sufism which cannot be ignored. These women not only helped Sufism to spread in the inner lives marked by domestic walls, but their spirituality went out in public where women have set out on the path, braving all hardships on the roads, are beyond the differentiation of sexes (Schimmel 1984). This study helps in making connections with the often forgotten and under researched, yet significant areas of research.

Keywords: Female Sufi saints; female literary tradition, feminism

Introduction

Women have strikingly remained absent until recently from the historiography of the Sufi movement. Sufism, also called *Tasawwuf*, is a mystical movement which can be traced back to the beginning of Islam. It “represents one of the most complete and well preserved metaphysical and esoteric traditions that has survived in the modern world” (Nasr 1972, p. 12). This paper identifies a missing narrative in the existing literature related to the dominant Sufi historiography and is therefore a relevant and timely commentary on the importance of women’s voices within Sufism. This study follows in the footsteps of scholars such as Annemarie Schimmel (1984) and Margaret Smith (1984) to revise the dominant historiography with the aim to explore women’s role in Sufism. Both their works are groundbreaking for bringing back the lost and forgotten narratives of women Sufi saints. This project will build on their work by talking about the gendered divisions within Sufism and the feminist connections to the historical development of its mysticism. This project situates women at the centre of Sufi discourse and strives to trace the significance of the literary and theological contributions of female saints to the Islamic mystical tradition. As such, it strives to emphasise the centrality of women within Sufism, arguing for a recognition of the importance of women throughout Sufi historical development. The study uses a feminist framework as it adds to the overall scholarly work based on Sufism.

The paper will start with a discussion on Sufism to contextualise women’s contribution in the movement, followed by fleshing out the research questions that frame this paper. The paper will then discuss the lives of female saints to highlight their vital involvement within this movement from the very beginning. These figures not only helped Sufism to spread in the inner lives marked by domestic walls, but their spirituality went out in the public where “women who have set out on the path and persevere in it, braving all

hardships on the roads, are beyond the differentiation of sexes” (Schimmel 1984, p. 38). Saints like Rabi’a al-Adawiyya of Iran, Rabi’a of Syria, Karyagdi Sultan, Umm Haram, Mu’adha al-Adawiyya, Zarrin-Taj are examples of such great women. However, their literary and mystical contributions remain invisible in the dominant Sufi historiographies. I read the invisibility of female Sufi lives and their poetic compositions as a structural erasure by patriarchal forces. As Gilbert and Gubar highlight in their seminal work *Madwomen in the Attic* (2000), though in a different topological and historical setting, female literary tradition is possibly being “deprecated or derided by male (and even some female) readers”, resulting in their visible invisibility in the dominant literary tradition (p. 30). The paper will then show how a connection is established between female saints and ‘ordinary’ females across the centuries as a female subculture is built. However, while on the one hand, female Sufis are seen as powerful role models, on the other hand, these same female figures are used as examples to subjugate women in patriarchal societies. One is raised to the status of sainthood, making them exceptional, while the other is domesticised, as gentle, meek, and submissive.

This paper is, thus, an attempt to build connections with (as gender theorists would put it) the ‘deliberately’ forgotten female Sufi saints’ lives and literary compositions, some of which even led to major sub-sects that are now found in Sufism, like asceticism and mysticism. As the paper re-situates female Sufi saints back into the dominant discourse, this paper asks important questions such as: what does the presence of female Sufi saints tell us about Sufism? How does it disrupt the dominant narrative where men are always seen as saints? How have female saints survived over all these years in the deeply patriarchal societies where they have lived? How does sainthood connect to everyday lives of these Sufi females and finally, how does it connect/divide with the lives of ‘ordinary’ women of the times?

Understanding Sufism

Sufism is often understood as a “movement within Islam” (Attar p. 1), however, as Shah, among various other scholars, rightly note:

to say that Sufism, an approach to the Absolute by way of self- discipline, heightened perception, restrained intelligence and profound emotion, must be restricted to those who come to it through the gate way of Islam’s Shariah seems on the face of it almost perversely narrow (Shah 1979, p. 10).

Unlike Islam and the various theological sects within it, Sufism does not situate its rationale of knowing God through scriptural evidence. Rather, it is a “systematic and well structured path to knowing God through a process of internal transformation, which attempts to transcend the ordinary human condition”, making Sufism more mystical (Shihadeh 2007, p. 2). While Sufism shares several common themes with theology, like the belief in the oneness of God, these come with a focus on individual experiences. For instance, differently from the *Kalām* theologians, who are the philosophers of Islamic doctrines, Sufis (the followers of Sufism) “often expressed themselves enigmatically and typically recommended recollection (*dhikr*) and silence, rather than debate” (p. 3). There are seven stages that a Sufi must experience in their search for God, which are *Rehmat* (mercy), *Wara* (fear of not being able to meet God), *Zuhd* (renunciation), *Faqr* (poverty), *Ṣabr-e-nafs* (patience on desires), *Tawakkul* (trust), and *Rida* (satisfaction) (Haire 1997 p. 47). It is thus the internal transformation and the states that one transcends to come closer to God, which remains at the heart of Sufism. In other words, it is the level of spiritually rather than theological understanding which defines the path of a Sufi, leading them to attain sainthood.

Notably, both men and women have attained the rank of sainthood in Sufism, experiencing the mystical state of transcendence. However, women have been silenced and erased in the widely circulated Sufic narratives and historiographies. Among the most popular existing literature on Sufism, involving books like *The Sufis* (1964) by Idries Shah, *What is Sufism?* by Martin Lings (1975), *Essential Sufism* by Robert Frager (1997) and *Sufism and Theology* by Ayman Shihadeh (2007), the involvement and contribution of female Sufi saints is completely ignored. These book-length studies and compilations of stories from the life of Sufi saints easily pass over an entire body of Sufi lives and works, distorting the ‘history’ of this movement. In doing so, what is lost or buried down the lane of a misreported history are the lives of female Sufi saints—as well as their compositions, especially poetry, which have been an essential part of Sufi tradition.

Sufi poetry, now hugely famous across the world, was originally composed as a way for worshipping God. They were “the yearning of the lover (the mystic) for the Beloved (God), and for a renewal of that intimate union which existed between the two before the dawn of creation” (Attar p. 18). Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭar, the thirteenth century Persian Sufi poet and mystic, writes about the lives of thirty-nine Sufi saints in his only surviving book *Tazkirat al-Awliyā*, translated in English by Arberry in 2000. Athar includes female Sufi saints in this hagiographic collection and draws attention to their contribution in bringing new themes while composing poems (Attar p. 33). For instance, Rabi’a was the first Sufi to introduce the concept of love to Sufi poetry (Chishti 1987, p. 455). However, over the years, the contribution of female Sufis is erased; while compositions of male Sufis like Rumi, Sa’adi, and Hafiz remain dominant in the mainstream.

Female Sufi saints and their contribution

Annemarie Schimmel's opening lines of "A women saint in Islam – is that not a contradiction in itself?" reveals the ignorance of the mainstream patriarchal society on this subject (1984, p. 26). Women as saints, especially in Islam, where it is generally perceived that the religion is male dominated given its legacy of male prophethood, more often comes across in denial than a harmonious idea. Near to the beginning of this century, there has been a rise in scholarship which looks at the connections between gender, sanctity, and sainthood, revealing the embeddedness of religious historiographies within patriarchal narratives. Works of scholars like Olivia M. Espín and Laura J. May are examples of such studies.

Nevertheless, Schimmel (1984) along with scholars like Margaret Smith (1984), Javad Nurbakhsh (2004), and Kelly Pemberton (2010) have challenged the dominant patriarchal gaze as they explore how women have been an inherent, inseparable aspect of Sufism.

Smith writes that "it was the development of mysticism (Sufism) within Islam, which gave women their great opportunity to attain the rank of sainthood" (1984, p. 1). Since mysticism relates more to the inner transformation than with conversation with the outer world, domestic spaces became the access points for women to attain sainthood. The women from the Prophet's family were the first ones to walk on the path of sainthood. Khadija and Fatima, the Prophet's wife and daughter respectively, led their lives outrightly in a Sufi way. For the various accounts that are still available on these women, it is evident that they embodied practices such as '*Rehmat*' (mercy) and had full control over their '*nafs*' (desires). *Rehmat* and control over one's *nafs* are the initial stages among the seven stages which a Sufi undertakes in his/her journey to attain sainthood (Qadri 2016). Schimmel says of Khadija and Fatima that they are the "embodiment of devotion and noble qualities for all Muslims...these two women from the Prophet's family stand at the beginning of Islamic piety and occupy a

very distinguished rank” (1984, p. 30). Such an early and significant appearance of women in this movement shows how sainthood was brought and taken up by women as much as by men.

Smith remarks that “as far as the rank among the ‘friends of God’ was concerned, there was complete equality between the sexes” (Smith 1984, p. 1). In this context, the saint Rabi’a al-Adawiyya, born around C.718, becomes an important figure. She was the first and continues to be the most prominent of Sufis who walked out of the gendered categorisation in her devotion and love towards God. Of Rabi’a, Jami says:

If all women were like the one we have mentioned,
then women would be preferred to men.
For the feminine gender is no shame for the sun,
nor is the masculine gender an honor for the crescent moon! (Schimmel 1984, p. 33)

Rabi’a was a saint who not only shared equal status with her contemporary male saints but also gained equal respect which was surprising for the time and place in which she lived. Her first and most authentic biographer, a Sufi himself, Farid al- Din Attar, narrates anecdotes from Rabi’a’s life in his book *Tazkirat al-Awliya*. In one of the anecdotes, he tells an account from her life where she rises above Hasan of Basra, her Sufi cotemporary, in both wisdom and devotion. Hasan once found Rabi’a near a lake and seeing her, he threw his prayer mat on the surface of water and invited Rabi’a to accompany him in praying over water. Rabi’a in turn invited him to pray with her in air by suspending her prayer mat in the air. Seeing Hasan’s incapability to do so, she says “Hasan, what you did fishes also do, and what I did flies also do. The real business is outside both these tricks. One must apply one’s self to the real business” (Attar p. 45). Here, Rabi’a criticizes Hasan for boasting his spiritual powers and takes the opportunity to guide him on the right path of Sufism, which is to do the ‘real business’—to love God for one’s own sake. The presence of this anecdote in Athar’s

book speaks volumes about the prominence of female saints and their acceptability within Sufism. Rabi'a did not only prove to be higher in rank than the celebrated Hasan of Basri (a famous Sufi saint) but also enjoyed the freedom to advise him.

Unlike Hasan and her other contemporaries, Rabi'a emphasized love. In the anecdotes and hymns that are available from her, she refuses to link love with the material realities of the world. For her, love towards one's Master (God) must be free from all expectations (Ford 1999; Jamil 2018). Significantly, it is this belief which marks Rabi'a as unique from the rest of her contemporaries. Her difference in understanding one's relationship with God brought the historical shift from asceticism to mysticism in the Sufi movement. While under asceticism Sufi (known as the school of Hasan al-Basri), strict rules to self-discipline were practiced, mysticism allowed a freer space to celebrate individual growth. The idea that a person worships God keeping in mind the rewards (the heaven and hell) was disoriented under this newly formed ideology, and love and beauty became the central themes. Mysticism soon became closer to Sufis than asceticism ever was, making Rabi'a an important historical figure that "stands at an important juncture of religious life in Islam" (Schimmel 1984, p. 26). In the same context, Attar praises her by saying:

"Rabi'a was unique, because in relations [with God] and her knowledge she had no equal; she was highly respected by all the great [mystics] of her time and she was a decisive proof, i.e., an unquestioned authority, to her contemporaries" (qtd. in Smith 1984, p. 47).

It is important to note that apart from Rabi'a there are many other female Sufis who have made an everlasting impact on this movement. Not all female saints followed the beliefs and teachings of Rabi'a and had their own perspective. For instance, Muadha al-Adawiyya, a contemporary of Rabi'a, shared opposite views with her. She was also regarded highly in the ranks of sainthood in her contemporary times. Her devotion and popularity led her to be

remembered as a “faithful representative of the school of Hasan al-Basri, concerned with asceticism rather than mysticism” (Smith 1984, p. 145).

Not only in sainthood, but in the composition of poetry, which is an essential part of Sufism, female saints have contributed significantly and have stood up to their individual beliefs. Zarrin Taj, also known as Qurrat al-Ayn, was famous for her mystical poems and died as a martyr in 1852. She used poetry to express her complete surrender to God and gave up on everything for the love of God. The last lines of one of her most popular poems “A ghazal” reads, “The country of ‘I’ and ‘We’ forsake; thy home in Annihilation make, / since fearing not this step to take, thou shalt gain the highest felicity” (qtd. in Smith 1984, p. 163). Interestingly, her poems were not only exemplary of Sufi devotion but were immensely popular even among the male circles. Such popularity hints towards the unproblematic co-existence of both male and female Sufis within Sufism. However, in the more recent times, as is outlined in several other feminist projects, “male-dominated history and historiography” has led to a systematic erasure of such remarkable female voices (Newey 2016, p. 86).

Building connections: surviving patriarchy

While little is known about the ways in which saints like Rabi’a and her contemporaries survived in the earlier centuries, the more contemporary experiences of female Sufi saints highlight the struggles and challenges they face in their everyday lives. These experiences are powerful testaments of female survival in male-dominated societies. In the last decade of the 20th century, a rising sisterhood among Sufi women was witnessed in Istanbul where women moved together in small apartments for composition of poems and hymns as well as for other acts of worshipping. One such group is famous by the name of ‘Gonenli’s group’. Catharina Raudvere writes of this group enthusiastically in her book *The*

Book and the Roses (2002). She explores the ways in which these women spent their time reciting prayers to God and marvels about how they have enriched the field of literature by composing amazing verses. What is noteworthy in Raudvere's account is the manner in which these women made their way into the public sphere. In Istanbul, a place governed under strict conservative law, these women went out on the streets, and, as Raudvere writes: "in order to bring money for the principal enterprise, the women opened a pastry shop a few blocks away [from their gathering place]" (Raudvere 2002, p. 126). The pastry shop was initially a means to meet the expenses of their Sufism enterprise, and as Sufi saints—either male or female—are regarded high in Islamic cultures, they had advantage over the 'ordinary' people. Thus, these women escaped any backlash from the male-dominated patriarchal society. What was initially a necessity for their Sufism enterprise soon gave them mobility and access to marketplaces in cities like Istanbul. Being financially independent, Sufism in their case helped them break the confines of the patriarchal Turkish society. A closed network of women thus uplifted each other in both spiritual and material realities of everyday life.

In the same book, Raudvere at a later point recounts how stories of saints such as Rabi'a and other prominent female figures were narrated in order to encourage ordinary women of the present time (Raudvere 2002, p. 175). A similar approach has been witnessed in a part of Nigeria in the 20th century where the example of a female saint is used by ordinary women to fight for their rights. Nana Asma'u, a Sufi saint, poet, and scholar, was well-known for exercising free will in a deeply patriarchal society in the 19th Century. Asma'u advocated "the importance of seeking knowledge, [as] the Quran is also clear about equality. Both female and male believers are addressed equitably at every juncture" (Mack 2011, p. 154). A century later, a group of women in Northern Nigeria revived Asma'u in their everyday lives and "measured their aims against the example of Asma'u: the question was

never ‘Will my husband let me?’ but always the cheekier query, following the sucking of teeth ‘Would Asma’u have needed permission?’” (Mack 2011, p. 155). In such instances, women across centuries talk to each other, building their own tradition and links, subverting the male dominant Sufi tradition.

Feminist projects, especially in the second wave of feminism, soon after the publication of *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) by Elaine Showalter, have identified various such connections between the women of past and the contemporary women in establishing a female literary tradition. This tradition, termed as gynocriticism by Showalter, refuses to fit women writers and women experiences in a linear progression, which is a male model of historiography. Rather, as Virginia Woolf expressed, even before Showalter, in her pioneering work *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), it is the connections, interactions, internalised consciousness, and everyday occupation which mark women’s subculture. In the context of Sufi women, as these inter-generation conversations take place which are based on fond attachments and sisterhood between the saintly and the ‘worldly’ women, historiography of Sufi women becomes even more important for feminists.

Divisions: female sanctity

However, such an easy reading of the impact of female saints on ordinary lives is to eliminate the other side of the story completely. Since a woman holding high rank is always received as a threat in a patriarchal society, to maintain its hold, patriarchy creates divisions and hierarchies among women. The saintly—in this case, the Sufi women—are elevated and made exceptional while all the rest are deteriorated and made objects of subjugation. Sufi women are detached from all base realities and therefore shown as women of no flesh and blood. Venerated saints in Christianity are the counterparts of female Sufi saints as they are

also the noted exception among women. May delineates in her thesis titled “Gender, sanctity and sainthood” that “female saints represented everything from a new Virgin Mary to a new imitation of Christ” whereas, ordinary women would have to work under the pressures of their husbands and fathers, as well as would only be told lessons about obedience and submissiveness from the lives of female saints (May 1992, p. 2). Such framings are highly problematic on two levels. First, they desexualize saintly women and second, ‘ordinary’ women are bound within oppressive patriarchal structures. Though from the example from Istanbul, women can be seen fighting against such structures by using Sufism as an inspiration to improve their everyday life experiences, it remains the most strategically used equipment to dislocate women in society. The gap between the saintly and the worldly is often unbridgeable under a deeply patriarchal setup.

Women are further isolated from society by secluding them from artistic composes, as “poetry was a male domain and it was considered shameful for females to expose, or ‘unveil’ in this literary fashion” (Ridgeon 2006, p. 37). However, as this paper highlights, voices of Sufi women have existed all along. To give an example among several others, the songs composed by Malakeh-ye-Iran were sung by both men and women. Hence, the assertion that women had an insignificant role to play in Sufism or that “the majority of women are lacking in religion and virtue and that which prevails in them is ignorance and evil desires” lacks a sound reasoning (Smith 1984, p. 133). Thus, despite the gendered division in the historiographies of male and female Sufi saints, and also within Sufism, which deliberately made women to disappear from this movement, women negotiated their ways and carried forward their literary and spiritual legacy.

A saint like Rabi’a who marked an important milestone in the Sufi way of thought, from asceticism to mysticism, was widely known and celebrated around her time but is hardly known now. The fate of so many women saints have been the same, even though

“spiritual blessings [...] in Islam were intended to be available for all human beings” (Smith 1984, p. 135). A slight shift in the focus can thus bring them back to the centre, breaking the monopoly of male saints. Hence, while patriarchal powers have worked with more regulated steps in silencing and erasing the history of female Sufi saints over centuries, now the mere presence of female voices, though in the peripheries, reaffirms their undeniable and inequitable contribution in this movement.

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