ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	TOWARDS A FEMINIST RECONSTRUCTION OF PERSIAN SUFISM
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Contrary to many claims, Sufism is not a gender-neutral discourse and practice. Although women have been present since the inception of Sufism in the eighth century CE, like most androcentric knowledge, the foundational discourse of Sufism is defined by male interest and male privilege. Seeking to address the gender bias in Persian Sufism, this dissertation offers a feminist interdisciplinary examination of Persian Sufism through various forms of textual analysis—linguistic, psychoanalytic, formal—in different fields of study: religious studies, medieval historiography, literature, and ethnography. Through analysis and interpretation of some of the foundational texts of Persian Sufism written from the 10th to the 13th century CE—Hujwiri's *Kashf al-mahjub*, Ibn Munavvar's *Asrar al-tawhid*, Attar's *Tazkirat al-awliya* and *Illahi-nama*, and Rumi's *Masnavi*—my work offers a map of the construction of gender and women's participation in the early discourse of Persian

Sufism that continues to shape the understanding and practice of Sufism in contemporary times. Following medieval textual analysis, I provide an ethnography of women's diverse experiences as members of the Nimatullahi Sufi order from an insider perspective. The analysis of early influential texts will reverberate through the ethnographic chapter, since many of the texts that I discuss are still central in Sufi ethos and practice. My aim throughout this dissertation is to address male privilege in Persian Sufism by deconstructing the myth of the exceptional woman in Sufism, highlighting women's involvements in early Sufi communities, reinterpreting Sufi narratives to engage the gender question meaningfully, turning negative interpretations of women into empowering and inspiring tales of women's spirituality, and finally, to record and preserve the contributions of contemporary women in Sufism for future generations.

TOWARDS A FEMINIST RECONSTRUCTION OF PERSIAN SUFISM

by

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Table of Contents

This Table of Contents is automatically generated by MS Word, linked to the Heading formats used within the Chapter text.

Notes on Transliteration

I have tried to use a system of transliteration that would accommodate both Arabic and Persian usage with some consistency, a system modified slightly from the one used by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. I have omitted most diacritical marks in the text and notes to facilitate reading ayn and hamza. However, I have returned the ayn and hamza unless they begin a word, for instance, instead of ‘Abd, I write Abd, but I preserve the mark for the ayn in Rabi’a. For proper names of people and places, I use Brill’s *Encyclopedia of Islam*, second edition, whenever possible. Generally, I have made a conscious choice of using the Arabic spelling of names over the Persian spelling simply because the Arabic has become the more accepted English spelling. Whenever there is an exception, like *zikr* instead of *dhikr*, I provide the alternative in parenthesis.

Chapter 1: Introduction

> Since women never go out to fight the holy war, how should they engage in the Greater Holy War?
>
> Rumi, *Masnavi*, Book VI

Having been born into an Iranian Sufi community, I was raised with spiritual values long before I could actually name and define them. Having been born a girl in a culture that defined femininity in oppressive ways, I was also aware of inequality and questioning it long before I was formally introduced to feminist concepts. And yet growing up, I had learned to accept sex segregation in the Sufi commune, the mandatory veiling of women in Sufi lodges, and the absence of women in leadership roles as norms of an Islamic culture. Moreover, I was never completely convinced that the core teachings of Sufism could be divorced from its social and cultural construction. I had a vague and inarticulate feeling that Sufism like most other "serious" undertakings was male.

It was in the United States while studying for my B.A. and M.A. in English literature and living in a Sufi lodge in San Francisco that my struggle between the two seemingly incompatible practices of Sufism and feminism started. I remember feeling quite uncomfortable sitting in the meditation room of the Sufi lodge where the portraits of many masters from the past hung on the walls. Where were the Sufi women and why were they always invisible? Although at that time I had already read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and could relate to her feeling of inadequacy under the dome of the British Library, I was still too afraid and insecure to articulate fully my concerns and questions. As a young married woman in her mid-twenties and a mother of one, I was still in the early process of self-discovery. Living in a Sufi commune with eight people was a challenging task. Moreover, as a Sufi novice I was constantly reminded (through poetry, the

Master's speeches, and occasional visits from a traveling representative of the order) that I should not give in to questioning, that I should quiet my mind and open up my inner eye in order to embark on a spiritual journey. However, as a university student I was not only constantly analyzing and developing my intellectual skills, but also learning to use feminist theory as an effective critical tool. My only solution to this growing contradiction was to keep my feminism and my Sufism in parallel movements, hoping that one day I could begin a conversation between the two.

More than twenty years later, this dissertation is an endeavor to start that conversation. Drawing on the research of many Western and non-Western scholars in the fields of feminist theology, feminist interdisciplinary religious studies, feminist history, feminist literary criticism, and feminist ethnography, my aim is to produce a kind of feminist praxis of Persian Sufism.

Section 1: A Brief History of Sufism

Westerners often identify Sufism with "whirling darvishes," a nineteenth-century Mevlevi Sufi dance that was made known in the West by travelers to Turkey. However, Sufism has a much more complex and diverse history. Known in most references as "Islamic mysticism," most scholars of Sufism trace its development to individual ascetic practices in the second Islamic/eighth century CE.[1] There is considerable agreement among scholars that the word Sufi most probably comes from *Suf*, the Arabic word for "wool" which was coined to distinguish renunciants who wore wool from the majority of Muslims who wore linen.[2] Exactly what these early "wool-wearers" believed in is hard to ascertain. It seems that at this point in the history of Sufism there was as yet no coherent system of mystical belief. Though other words like *zahid* (renunciant), *nasik* (pietist), and *abid* (pietist) continued to be the primary signifiers of renunciation, by the middle of the third/ninth

century the word “Sufi” gradually came to define a distinct type of piety based on mystical experiences.[3] Significantly, instead of distinct schools of mysticism, this early period in the evolution of mysticism in the region is marked by pioneering figures (some of whom were not even renunciants), who came to embody the foundations of the mystical path later known as Sufism. Among this group, one can mention the renown female Sufi/mystic Rabi'a al-‘Adawiyya (d. 185/801) in Basra, Shaqiq al-Balkhi (d. 194/810) in northern Khurasan, Dhu'l-Nun al-Misri (d. 245/860) in Egypt, al-Harith al-Muhasibi (d. 243/857) in Baghdad, and Bayazid Tayfur ibn Isa al-Bastami (d. 234/848) also in Khurasan. From this group only Muhasibi has left written works about his mystical beliefs. The others are known as prominent early figures only through the stories and biographies that were composed by other Sufis and non-Sufis of the later generations.

In its next phase, Sufism emerged as a full-fledged movement in the Abbasid capital, Baghdad. By the middle of the third/ninth century, the term Sufi was increasingly used in references to Baghdad mystics.[4] However, there was also a concurrent mystical movement in greater Khurasan (a historical region in northeastern Persia). Later, the compilers of Sufi biographies and histories presented both movements (Baghdad and Khurasan) as parts of the same Sufi tradition, perhaps wanting to stress the similarities between the two modes of mysticism. However, historical data suggests that the two trends of mysticism were developed independently of each other and had distinct characteristics and modes of piety pertaining to the region in which they emerged. Generally, the Baghdad trend of Sufism was more theoretical and theological than the Khurasani trend. It also placed more emphasis on renunciation in its rejection of gainful employment and preference for celibacy. On the other hand, the Khurasani trend rejected renunciation as a viable spiritual option and instead emphasized training of the material self, gainful employment, and self-sacrifice.[5]

Many scholars see the mysticism of Khurasan, which by the fourth/tenth century adopted the term Sufism, as a distinctively Persian Sufism. The Khurasanian trend was more Persian not only in the sense that it came to be expressed more and more in the Persian language, but also in the way it blended many indigenous mystical traditions such as *Malamatiyya* (the Path of Blame) and *jawanmardi* (codes of chivalry) to construct its own brand of Sufism. The *Malamatiyya* was a mystical tradition of piety that developed in Khurasan, in particular Nishapur, during the late third/ninth century under the leadership of Hamdun al-Qassar (d. 271/884). Its advocates believed that in order to achieve sincere devotion to God (*ikhlas*) one had to be vigilant in anticipating the conceit and inflation of the *nafs* (ego) by constantly exposing the *nafs* to blame and humiliation.[6] Accordingly, the "People of Blame" refused to wear distinctive clothing, took care to earn their own living, and had no distinct public rituals; they performed *zikr* (remembrance of God) silently and did not hold *sama*' sessions (a communal ritual involving vocal *zikr* and music). The second mystical tradition of Khurasan, the *jawanmardi, futuwwat* in Arabic (chivalry, generosity, literally "youngmanliness"), originated in artisanal classes in medieval Persian towns.[7] The associations formed from these wage-earning classes attracted young men of different professions who were required to abide by the ethical code of chivalry. They were especially asked to practice *ithar* (extreme altruism or self-sacrifice) in the form of always giving precedence to others. Since many of the mystical/Sufi teachers of Khurasan and Nishapur referred to themselves as *fatan* (someone on the path of *futuwwa*), and dedicated many sayings and even a whole treatise to the topic, it is evident that the social-professional *futuwwa* and the mystical *futuwwa* were interrelated.[8] This interrelatedness is especially strong in the way *Malamatiyya* adopted the principles of *futuwwa*. First, the *Malamatiyya* incorporated the practice of altruistic self-sacrifice or *ithar*. Second, the *Malamatiyya* used the guise of the social *futuwwa* to hide their mystical life. Many of the *Malamati*

teachers and disciples bore epithets indicating crafts and profession: al-Haddad (the ironsmith), al-Qassar (the bleacher), al-Hajjam (the cupper), al-khayyat (the tailor). In the *Malamatiyya Epistle* Hamdun al-Qassar advises ʻAbdullah al-Hajjam: "It is better for you to be known as ʻAbdullah al-Hajjam (the bath attendant, cupper) than as ʻAbdullah the Mystic (al-ʻArif), or as ʻAbdullah the Ascetic (al-Zahid)."[9]

Sufism gradually expanded outward from the two original centers—Baghdad (the capital of the Abbasid dynasty) and Khurasan—that were parts of the vast Persian Empire conquered by Islam. From these Persian regions (in present-day Iraq and Iran), Sufism spread to Turkey, Egypt, Syria, the Balkans, Spain, central Asian countries such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, parts of India, and, ultimately, to most places where Islam traveled.

The cultural diversity of Sufi communities makes it hard to produce general claims about Sufism. Depending on the time, place, the dominance of a particular Islamic thought, cultural and linguistic background, and the traditional foundations of a Sufi order, the practice of Sufism has varied from one community to the next.

Subsection 1: Scope of This Dissertation in Terms of the History and Geography of Sufism

In this dissertation, I will focus on the gendered expressions of Sufism in the selected medieval Persian texts from the fifth/eleventh century to the seventh/thirteenth century, that have become the foundational texts for many Sufi orders in Iran and elsewhere. Shaykh Abu al-Hasan Hujwiri's *Kashf al-mahjub* (Uncovering the Veiled), Muhammad ibn Munavvar's *Asrar al-tawhid fi maqamat Shaykh Abi Sa'id* (The Secrets of [God's] Unity in the Spiritual Stations of Shaykh Abu Sa'id), Farid ad-Din Attar's *Tazkirat al-awliya* (Memorial of God's Friends) and *Ilahi-nama*, and Jalaluddin Rumi

Balkhi's *Masnavi* have been read and studied for centuries in Sufi communities in Iran and have become part of the living tradition of Sufism in Persian-speaking Sufi communities.

Geographically speaking, the texts I analyze in this dissertation are mostly either produced by writers who lived in the region loosely defined as greater Khurasan, or else (in the case of Rumi) were greatly influenced by its traditions. Given the often shifting and ambiguous boundaries of greater Khurasan in medieval texts, I find it more useful and practical in this study to define greater Khurasan in relation to its important centers rather than uncertain boundaries.[10] Khurasan in this sense comprised principally the cities of Balkh, Herat, and Ghazni (now in Afghanistan), Nishapur and Tus (now in Iran), Merv (now in Turkmenistan), and Samarqand and Bukhara (now in Uzbekistan).

Section 2*:* Sufism as Spiritual Practice

Because the Khurasani trend emphasized practice (training) over theory, it gradually produced prominent training masters (some illiterate) who trained their disciples through vigorous and constant supervision in Sufi lodges (*khaniqah*) across the Persian territories, thus constructing Sufi spiritual lineages, defining master-disciple bonds and relationships and producing rules of conduct and etiquette for communal living and ritual participation.[11]

In spite of the diversity of Sufism, it is possible to define the desired objective of Sufism as union with God or beloved, which according to Sufis can only happen once one loses one's ego identity and is annihilated in the totality of God. At the very core of this system is the relationship between the master and his disciples. A master (*pir, murad*) is a perfected human being who has already traveled the spiritual path towards the Truth (*haq*). A disciple (*murid, salek*) is a wayfarer on

the path of Truth who gives himself/herself over to a master and submits to his guidance in all matters. The relationship between the master and his disciple hinges on the belief that losing one's ego identity can only be possible through submission. In other words, one cannot devise any plans to discipline, change, or control his/her ego for the simple reason that such decisions originate from the ego itself and the ego cannot turn against itself.[12] However, submitting to a master cannot be based on calculations or intellectual understanding. The journey to "nothingness" (as described by one of the greatest Khurasan Sufi masters, Abu Sa'id Abu'l-Khayr, d. 440/1049) is a journey of suffering and pain without any expectations. No rational mind will submit to this journey. Thus, it is only through intense love and devotion that one can walk this path. An example often cited in Sufi literature is the love of Rumi (d. 672/1273) for his master Shams-i Tabrizi. It was this intense love that reoriented Rumi and turned him from an ordinary teacher of religious discourse to a crazy lover/disciple, preferring Shams-i Tabrizi's ill-tempered and at times sacrilegious behavior to the respect shown to him by others.[13]

The bond between a master and a disciple is established through a *zikr* that a master gives the disciple at the time of her/his initiation. *Zikr* as a spiritual exercise is a certain repetition of words (often names of God) through focused and controlled breathing.[14] The transmission (*talqin*) of a *zikr* from master to disciple connects the disciple to a *silsila* (a chain of transmissions) and thus to a particular Sufi order. Most Sufi orders are named after a famous Sufi master who has codified certain teachings and practices at a particular time and place. So, for example, the Qadiri order is named after Abd al-Qadir Gilani (d. 561/1166), the Naqshbandi order after Baha al-Din Naqshband Bukhari (d. 793/1390), and the Nimatullahi order after Shah Nimatullah Wali (d. 834/1431). All orders trace their lineages to the Prophet Muhammad, although, according to Sufi scholarship, lineages are often a retrospective reconstruction that occurred whenever the need for the construction

of a given *silsila* arose.[15]

Gradually, as the bond between a master and his disciples became more formal and central to the practice of Sufism, Sufi lodges (*khaniqah*) acquired special importance in the development of Sufi teachings and transmissions of spiritual knowledge. Before the fourth/tenth century the places called *khaniqah* in Khurasan were associated with the Karramiyya piety movement,[16] but by the late fourth/tenth century, a *khaniqah* was mostly recognized as the place where Sufis gathered and/or lived. As many scholars have pointed out, while terms like *duwayra* (little house) and *zawiya* (retreat), *ribat* (house), and *tekke* (where one rests) were used in many regions, in Khurasan the Persian term *khangah* (khan=house + gah=place), Arabised as *khanqah* (*khaniqah* in contemporary Persian), became the standard term for Sufi lodges in the Persian-speaking world.[17] Sufi lodges were often complexes which accommodated a Sufi master (shaykh) and his family while providing a communal space for the disciples and visitors. Abu Sa'id Abu'l-Khayr's *khaniqah* in Mayhana is often cited not only as an example of how these complexes were conceived but also as a beginning of an institution. Abu Sai'd famously composed ten rules regulating communal life in the *khaniqah*.[18] The rules emphasize cleanliness, performing communal prayers, sitting in meditation and saying silent *zikr*, eating together, and helping the poor and the needy. At the end, Abu Sa'id summarizes his rules in saying that the Sufis residing in the *khaniqah* must be busy either studying, meditating (saying silent *zikr*), or working to bring comfort to others. These basic rules still govern the operation of many Sufi lodges in Iran and elsewhere. However, the most important function of a Sufi lodge was that it provided a space whereby a master could train and supervise his disciples regularly.

Subsection 1: Scope of This Dissertation in Terms of the Practice of Sufism

This dissertation is informed and conceived partly through my lived experiences in the Nimatullahi Sufi communities in Iran, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In my ethnography chapter, I provide an introduction to the Nimatullahi order, its history, practices, and organizations over time. However, it is important to note that even the selection of Sufi texts in this study were influenced by my experiences in Nimatullahi Sufi communities. The texts I analyze in this dissertation are the texts used and referenced in the Nimatullahi order today.

Section 3: Methodologies

Seeking to address the gender bias in Persian Sufism, this dissertation offers a feminist interdisciplinary examination of Persian Sufism through various forms of textual analysis—linguistic, psychoanalytic, formal—in different fields of study—religious studies, medieval historiography, literature, and translation studies. In addition to the textual analysis, I also conduct an ethnography from an insider perspective with members of the Nimatullahi Sufi order.

The interdisciplinary methodologies of this dissertation stem partly from the nature of the materials that allow for a study of medieval Persian Sufism. Many of the texts I analyze in this dissertation are historical texts, meaning that they construct histories of early Sufism. These are examined in part to consider the place of women in early Sufism, but even more importantly to consider the role of historians in their writings in constructing what later generations know or do not know about early Sufi women.

At the same time, some of these medieval historiographies, like *Kashf al-mahjub, Asrar al-tawhid,* and *Tazkirat al-awliya,* are also part of the literary canon of classical Persian literature. Literary analyses thus figure largely in this dissertation. One example, significant especially for its originality, is the feminist psychoanalytic discourse of Luce Irigaray that I deploy in the literature chapter. Irigaray's main argument is that the psychoanalytic model which is based on masculine libido does not allow the existence of two sexes. In my analysis, I show that when desire is defined as male, the discourse of renunciation as a Sufi concept of giving up one's desires acquires a different significance in relation to a female protagonist caught in the web of men's desires. I also employ Irigaray's theory of "sensible transcendence" as a way of critiquing and reinterpreting the opposition of the material/maternal body to male transcendence.

Furthermore, these texts also function as sacred teaching texts for many Persian-speaking Sufi communities. I would note here that although Sufism as a distinct spiritual practice was developed in relation to Islam, the teaching texts of Sufism are not necessarily the same as the Islamic texts (i.e. the Qur'an and the *ahadith*, or the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). I call the Sufi texts teaching texts rather than sacred texts because unlike most world religions where one major text defines the outlines and parameters of a belief system, often claiming revelation as its basis (like the Bible or the Qur'an), a textual understanding and transmission of Persian Sufism spans different texts and different genres.

As with medieval Persian studies, interdisciplinarity is also the foundation of feminist theology and feminist religious studies. One possible way of categorizing methodologies in these related fields is to divide them into two basic approaches: textual/interpretive and ethnographic/fieldwork. Due to the importance of scripture in world religions, feminist scholars of religion have paid special attention to scriptural readings and interpretation. Feminist scholars have

two methodologies in re-readings of sacred texts. One is to expose the cultural and historical constructions of sacred texts. The other is to produce feminist interpretations that run counter to the traditional male-privileged/misogynist meaning of the text. In both instances, feminist scholars are interested in the ways meanings are produced and in strategies for feminist reproduction of meanings.

Translation, in this dissertation, also figures among its multiple methodologies. The fact that my medieval sources are in Persian and my dissertation is written in English necessitates careful attention to the challenges of translation. Because of my advanced language skills in Persian (not only as a native speaker but also as a long-time student of Persian literature), I could read and analyze Persian medieval texts without difficulty. But when I needed to translate the texts to English, I chose to consult the available translations for two reasons: to provide English readers with references, and to check the translation of the text against my understanding of it. In many instances I found myself in disagreement with the existing translations and made significant modifications to them. Often, I changed the structure, the pronouns, or the word choices that would seem unnecessarily archaic to contemporary readers. However, in two places in my dissertation, I encountered mistranslations that resulted in meaningful misinterpretations of texts regarding gender. One mistranslation (Rkia Cornell's translation of *Asrar al-tawhid* at the end of chapter two) occurs when Cornell reads gender in a gender-neutral phrase, and ironically, the other (Paul Losensky's translation of Rabia's entry in *Tazkirat al-awliya* in chapter three) occurs when Losensky ignores the gendered meaning of the phrase and neutralizes it. In both instances the mistranslations change the meaning of gender in a significant way.

However, like many feminist scholars of religion I also realized that it would be a mistake if we stop at the texts and thus repeat the censure of Sufi women by not paying attention to the lived

experiences of women in contemporary Sufi communities. I therefore devoted an extensive chapter (Chapter Five) to an ethnography of Nimatullahi Sufi women. Doing an ethnography was the biggest methodological challenge of my dissertation. As a privileged insider, daughter of Javad Nurbakhsh, the late master of the Nimatullahi Sufi order, and sister of Alireza Nurbakhsh, the current master of the order, and as an active member of the Sufi community, I started my ethnographic research with trepidations and misgivings. As I explain in the introduction to my ethnography chapter, my primary anxiety, as to whether my loyalty to my Sufi community would limit my capability as a researcher, was gradually lessened as I studied ethnographies and tried to conduct my first interviews. Ultimately, I realized that my insider perspective not only gives me a kind of access that is often denied to an outsider, but it also precludes an established trust between an investigator and the community she investigates, a necessary condition for an ethnographer which can take years of fieldwork.

Section 4: The Significance of This Study

Although there have been several attempts at introducing gender as a category of analysis in the study of Sufism, a feminist examination of Sufism as a codified belief system and practice with a clear intent of producing feminist interpretations that expose male-privilege while acknowledging women's overlooked contributions to Sufism is a new undertaking.

Annemarie Schimmel's *My Soul Is a Woman* (1997), Sachiko Murata's *The Tao of Islam* (1992), and Maria Dakake's "Women and the Feminine in the Islamic Mystical Tradition" (2006), are well-known examples of gender scholarship in the field of Sufi literature (in part engaging Persian Sufi literature). Schimmel, Murata, and Dakake, following the approach of other senior

scholars of Sufism such as Henry Corbin, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and William Chittick, analyze gender in Sufi discourses according to the traditional dichotomy between the feminine and the masculine in Islamic discourses. Often, in their work, the feminine, which is associated with the *jamal* (beauty and mercy) of the Divine, is valorized over the masculine *jalal* (representing the majesty and power of *shari'a* law). Hence, these scholars of gender in Sufism reinscribe and naturalize the categories of masculine and feminine in Sufi discourses.

The two significant exceptions to the above traditional readings of gender in Sufi discourses are the scholarship of Rkia E. Cornell and Sadiyya Shaikh. Rkia Cornell's translation of Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami's *Dhikr an-niswa al-muta 'abbidat as suffiyat* as *Early Sufi Women* has undoubtedly been the most important contribution to the study of gender in Sufism. In her introduction to the book, Cornell offers an insightful analysis of women's involvement in Sufism based on Sulami's biographical sketches. I have benefited from Cornell's scholarship and refer to her frequently in chapters one and two. Sadiyya Shaikh's book, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality,* re-examines Ibn Arabi's contribution to Sufi discourses through exploring his conception of gender.[19] Shaikh identifies her project as "Islamic feminism" and uses "feminist hermeneutics" as a methodology in tracing women and their representation in the life and works of Ibn Arabi.

However, all of the works I mention above examine Sufi texts that are written in Arabic. The present dissertation on the other hand, is not only the first work employing feminist criticism in Persian Sufi texts, but also the first in providing an ethnography of contemporary women in a global Sufi order (in this case the Nimatullahi Sufi order). Moreover, instead of focusing on one writer, as Cornell's work on al-Sulami or as Shaikh's study of Ibn Arabi, this dissertation offers a more comprehensive understanding of Persian Sufism through an analysis of works by four major Sufi

contributors: Hujwiri, Ibn Munavvar, Attar, and Rumi. Through analysis of some of the foundational texts of Persian Sufism and an examination of women's diverse experiences as members of the Nimatullahi Sufi order, my work addresses the construction of gender and women's participation in Persian Sufism as a complex weave of textual knowledges and cultural practices that continue to define our understanding and experiences of Sufism in contemporary times even as we struggle with their limitations and strive to change their impact.

Section 4: Outline of Chapters

As I said earlier, I see my work as a feminist praxis of Persian Sufism, addressing both the academic need to study Persian Sufism, and the community-based need to practice Sufism, from a feminist standpoint. Since the medieval texts of Persian Sufism are part of a living tradition, it is impossible to change the practice of Sufism without actively engaging them. But it would also be a mistake if we stop at the texts and thus repeat the censor of Sufi women by not paying attention to the lived experiences of women in contemporary communities. As I hope to show in this dissertation, both projects are important to a feminist reconstruction of Sufism, which aims to create an inclusive, egalitarian community of spiritual seekers.

Chapter Two: Following the introduction (Chapter One) this substantive chapter starts with an overview of women's representation in the early Arabic histories of Sufism. I will then focus on two significant Persian histories of the period, Hujwiri's *Kashf al-mahjub* and ibn Munavvar's *Asrar al-tawhid*, and analyze the ways in which Persian Sufi histories greatly differ in the construction of gender and representations of women's participation in Sufi communities.

Chapter Three: Next, I address the confusing contradictory images of Rabi'a al-Adawiyya in the discourse of Sufism and trace her construction, albeit a composite image, as an exceptional woman of Sufism. Focusing on Attar's influential and intricate depiction of Rabi'a in *Tazkerat al-awliya* as the only woman saint worthy of a separate entry, I argue that her construction as a Sufi woman par excellence not only simultaneously denies and affirms women's spiritual presence as a rare possibility available only to exceptional women, but also overshadows and renders invisible all the real historical women who have made small imprints in the discourse of Sufi men.

Chapter Four: In this chapter I offer feminist re-readings of two significant Sufi poems by Attar and Rumi. In the two classical Sufi narratives I discuss, the woman's presence is central to the plot of the story and key to Sufi teachings. Using the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan and Salvoj Zizek, I read Attar's narrative in *Ilahi-nama* as a critique of phallic desire and a disruption of the discourse of renunciation as a gender-neutral discourse. Next, I use Luce Irigaray's "sensible transcendence" in my reading of Rumi's *Masnavi* to show that contrary to Rumi's comments on the story, the narrative itself challenges the privileging of the masculine transcendental over the feminine sensible and ultimately shows the interdependency of the sensible and transcendental in a spiritual undertaking.

Chapter Five: In chapter five, after introducing the Nimatullahi Sufi community, its history and practice, I present an ethnography of six contemporary Sufi women of the Nimatullahi order. The ethnography chapter focuses on the ways the gender construction of Persian Sufism has continued and/or changed through time in different cultural, historical, and geographical settings while they also record contemporary women's participation in Sufism and add to the scarce data on Sufi women's lived experiences.

Chapter Six: In my conclusion, using Carol Lee Flinders's discussion of the challenges of reconciling spirituality and feminism in contemplative practices, I explain the ways in which feminism enriches and informs the practice of Sufism.

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[1] From here on whenever I refer to centuries, I will cite the Islamic calendar first, followed by the Common Era.
[2] Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2007), 121-126.
[3] Ibid., 7.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 65-66.
[6] Ibid., 48.
[7] Sara Sviri, "Hakim Tirmidhi and the Malamati Movement in Early Sufism," in *Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (London: KNP, 1993), 603.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., 604.
[10] For a geographical and historical overview of greater Khurasan between the sixth and thirteenth centuries see Rocco Rante, ed. "'Khorasan Proper' and 'Greater Khorasan' within a politico-cultural framework," and David Durand-Guedy, "Pre-Mongol Khurasan: A Historical Introduction," in ed. Rocco Rante, *Greater Khorasan: History, Geography, Archaeology and Material Culture, Studies in the History and Culture of the Middle East*, vol. 29 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015).
[11] Karamustafa, 121-122.
[12] Alireza Nurbakhsh, "The Illusion of Self," *SUFI* 85 (Summer 2013), 8-10.
[13] For a comprehensive study of Rumi's life and teachings see Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi Past and Present, East and West* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000).
[14] For *Zikr* (also spelled *Dhikr*) see "Remembrance," in *The Path*, Javad Nurbakhsh (New York, London: KNP 2003), 131-145.
[15] For an overview of Sufi orders see Carl W. Ernst, *Sufism*: *An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam* (Boston: Shambala, 2011), 120-146.
[16] Jacqueline Chabbi, "Khankah" in the Encyclopedia of Islam, 2nd ed. Karramiyya was a prevalent piety movement characterized by self-mortification (*taqashshuf*), renunciation (*zuhd*), and prohibition against work for profit (*tahrim al-makasib*). For a study of Karramiyya in Khurasan see Margaret Malamud, "The Politics of Heresy in Medieval Khurasan: The Karramiyya in Nishapur," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 27, no.1/4, Religion and Society in Islamic Iran during the Pre-Modern Era (1994), 37-51.
[17] Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, 121.
[18] Muhammad ibn Munavvar, *Asrar al-tawhid fi maqamat al-Shaykh Abi Sa'id*, ed. Mohammad Reza Shafi'i-Kadkani (Tehran: Mu'assasa-i Intisharat-i Agah, 1366/1987), vol. 1, 317.
[19] Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-Arabi (d. 638/1240) is a thirteenth-century Andalusian Muslim mystic, philosopher, and legal scholar known for his valuable contributions to the mystical understanding of Islamic thought. His doctrine *of wahdat al-wujud* (unity of being) has been recognized as one of the core concepts of mystical experience by generations of Sufi masters and scholars.

Chapter 2: Medieval Persian Historiography of Khurasan Sufism: Mapping a Gendered Construction

History and the writing of history play a significant role in the theological construction of any religious community. As Rita M. Gross rightly observes, "religious communities constitute themselves in the present at least in part through their collective memory, the past that is ritually recalled, celebrated, and emulated."[1] Like most feminist history, a feminist reconstruction of religious history not only critiques the male-centered and/or misogynist appropriation of the past, but also recovers women's oftentimes censored or forgotten contributions to tradition building. In other words, a feminist reconstruction of religious history exposes the normative construction of religious history as a "gendered construction" that is shaped by numerous other discourses that generate social, cultural, and symbolic norms. In my examination of a number of significant Sufi history texts, I am particularly interested in the ways in which the normative discourse of Khurasan Persian Sufism is consolidated by the sixth/twelfth century. In what ways did this emerging normative discourse accommodate and/or challenge the existing gender norms of that time and place?

Given that historicizing Sufism is a relatively recent development, it should come as no surprise that historicizing women's involvement in Sufism has not even begun. As daunting as the task of writing women into the history of Sufism appears, feminist theory and scholarship have offered many ways of approaching medieval women's history where often historical data are either scant or else mediated by male writers and commentators. While there is little that allows us to see how women themselves perceived their experiences in Sufi communities, there is a significant body of literature that can shed light on the gendered construction of Sufi communities and Sufi discourses. While women as historical subjects continue to be important for feminist historians, gender analysis as a relational concept opens up the field of inquiry to include male as well as female

articulation of gender in a binary construct. As a result, even when it is impossible to recover women's own writings or creative expressions as evidence of their experiences, it is possible to turn to men's writing and investigate the traces of organization and structure of gendered relations they have left behind.

A feminist examination of the early historical compilations of Khurasan Sufism would no doubt uncover much about the extent and the nature of women's involvement in the early centuries of emerging Sufi discourses and practices. The most recent and exciting scholarship in this area is the discovery and publication of Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami's (d. 412/1021) long-lost manuscript of a biographical compilation of early Sufi women in a university library in Saudi Arabia in 1991.[2] The English translation of the book, entitled *Early Sufi Women*, was published in 1999. Rkia E. Cornell, the translator of the work, offers an extensive introduction to the history of the book, its author, and women's involvement in the Sufi traditions of early Sufism.

Sulami's biographical compilation consists of eighty-two short entries (eighty, considering the repetitions) on women ascetics and mystics who lived between second/eighth and fifth/eleventh centuries in various parts of the Islamic medieval world. Iraq and Khurasan are the most represented regions, while Syria, Damghan (in present-day Iran), and Egypt are also included in the compilation. As in his other biographical compilations on men ascetics and mystics, Sulami includes early renunciants, practitioners of Sufism associated with a Sufi teacher, members of *Malamatiyya* (the Path of Blame), and people associated with the culture/practice of *futuwwat* (chivalry).[3] Because of Sulami's inclusive approach, it is not always easy to distinguish between various modes of religious/spiritual practice and how exactly they are defined. Sulami often uses the Arabic words, *zahid*, *abid*, *nasik*, (translated as ascetic, renunciate, or pietist); occasionally he also uses the words Sufi, *arif* (translated as gnostic or mystic), or *fat*i (one who practices chivalry) to loosely define the

women he includes in his compilation. The entries in Sulami's biographical compilation of women mystics are not biographies in the modern sense of the word. Rather, like the other entries in the *tabaqat* [4] genre of Sufi biographies, each entry consists of a few individual accounts or anecdotes which together serve as a composite portrait of the spirituality of each woman.

According to Cornell's scholarship and Sulami's book, women were involved in the ascetic movements that gradually came under the umbrella term "Sufism" from the earliest recordings of such movements. Although Rabi'a al-Adawiyya (d. 185/801) has often been identified as the first Sufi woman, recent scholarship reveals that she represented the culmination, and not the beginning, of the tradition of women's spirituality in the region.[5] The first school of female asceticism was founded by Mu'adha al-Adawiyya, who lived a hundred years before Rabi'a.[6] Moreover, a critical examination of Rabi'a al-Adawiyya (as shown in chapter three of this dissertation) unmasks an intricate and contrary construction that aims to represent her as an exceptional Sufi woman and the gatekeeper of women in Sufi discourses.

The problem with our historical understanding of Rabi'a and other women mystics of the early period and even the later generations is that none of them left any writings. We therefore have to piece together their portrait from the writings of Sufi men—historians and biography compilers, who had their own views of womanhood and whether or not it was possible for women to embark on a spiritual path alongside their male counterparts.

Aside from Sulami, who compiled a separate biographical work on women, the notable early texts on Sufism in Arabic, have very few references to women Sufis and/or women who have attained significant spiritual states. *Kitab al-luma fi'l-tasawwuf* (The Book of Light Flashes on Sufism) of Abu Nasr 'Abd Allah ibn 'Ali al-Sarraj (d. 378/988), which is considered one of the earliest surviving manuals on Sufism, has one very brief reference to Rabi'a al-Adawiyya, two

references to Maryam (Mary, the mother of Jesus), and a single reference to Fatima (the Prophet Muhammad's daughter). Improving slightly, *Risala* (Treatise) of Abu'l-Qasim al-Qushayri (d. 465/1072) has eight references to Rabi'a al-Adawiyya, one reference to Umm Ali (Fatima) the wife of Ahmad ibn Khezruya of Balkh (d. 240/854), and other scattered references to women as *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet) transmitters or characters from the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition. In this manner, the early compilers and biographers of Sufism implicitly insured that a Sufi woman like Rabi'a or Umm Ali was represented as an exceptional woman and would not threaten the normative construction of gender that defined woman as inferior. However, because of the detached and third-person narration of these early Arabic texts on Sufism, it is very difficult to identify the ways in which authors and practitioners of Sufism like Sarraj and Qushayri viewed and re/produced gender in Sufi discourses.[7]

The Persian surveys and biographies of Sufism in the sixth/twelfth century, on the other hand, which start a little later than the Arabic writings (approximately fifty years after Sulami's publication and concurrently with Qushayri's writing of *Risala*), not only contributes to the growing body of works on Sufism and produces major texts that have a lasting influence on the construction of Sufism for centuries to come, but also provides the students of Sufism with a wealth of material on the ways in which Khurasan Sufi discourses are gendered discourses that problematize the presence of women in the Sufi communities and on the Sufi path.

In this chapter, I will focus on two major Persian texts on Sufism: *Kashf al-mahjub* (Uncovering the Veiled), the oldest Persian treatise on Sufism, and *Asrar al-tawhid fi maqamat Shaykh Abi Sa'id* (The Secrets of [God's] Unity in the Spiritual Stations of Shaykh Abu Sa'id), one of the most noted and celebrated hagiographies of the Sufi master Abu Sa'id-i Abu'l-Khayr (d. 440/1049) in Persian, in addition to a lesser known hagiography of Abu Sa'id, *Cheshidan-i ta'm-i*

vaqt: az miras-i irfani-i Abu Sa'id-i Abu'l-Khayr (Tasting the Moment: From the Mystical Legacy of Abu Sa'id Abu'l-Khayr). The two major texts I'm discussing in this chapter have had a lasting influence not only on the discourse of Sufism as a scholarly subject, but also on Sufi communities and the way Sufism is understood and practiced in different regions of the Persian-speaking world.[8] I will unpack their importance and influence separately when I discuss each text. My aim in reading these early Persian Sufi texts is twofold: first, to trace women's involvement and participation in Sufi communities, second, to show how male scholars' views of women shaped their construction of a gendered Sufi discourse.

Section 1: The Scholarly (Re)Production and the Personal Construction of Gender in *Kashf al-mahjub*

Shaykh Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Uthman al-Jullabi al-Hujwiri (d. 465/1073), the author of *Kashf al-mahjub*, was born near Ghazni (in present-day Afghanistan). Few details that are known about his life come from his own writings, although he cites Abu Fazl al-Khatli (also spelled as Khuttali, not a well-known figure) as his spiritual teacher. As was customary for many religious/spiritual seekers of the time he traveled widely in Syria, Iraq, Khurasan, Transoxiana, Azerbaijan, and Kerman and met prominent Sufis, teachers, and scholars of his time. In the latter part of his life he moved to Lahore under direct orders from his master. Apparently, his move from Ghazni to Lahore was a hasty affair and not altogether a convenient or pleasant experience.[9]

In spite of his initial aversion to the move, Hujwiri not only writes his most significant book on Sufism (*Kashf al-mahjub*) in Lahore, but he also becomes a revered and celebrated Sufi in the Indian subcontinent most likely because of this move. His tomb in Lahore is one of the most visited shrines in today's Pakistan. He is known in Lahore by his Hindi name "Data Ganj Bakhsh" (the giver who bestows treasure), and an annual festival is celebrated in his honor with the support of

Pakistan's Ministry of Charitable Trusts. Some of his influence in the region is attributed to the respect Shaykh Mu'in ad-Din Chishti (d. 634/1236), the founder of the Chishti Sufi Order (the most influential order in South Asia), had shown when visiting his tomb.[10]

Although Hujwiri has not enjoyed the same kind of celebrity and veneration in Persian Sufism as he has in India and Pakistan, he is recognized as the author of *Kashf al-mahjub* and his book is read in Sufi lodges by many students of Sufism in contemporary Iran.[11] Also, his book as the first treatise on the subject of Sufism, written in Persian, has influenced generations of Sufi writers and has become one of the foundational texts of Persian Sufi discourse.

Unlike his predecessors, Hujwiri narrates the story of Sufism through a personal voice. Moreover, by acknowledging his predecessors, Sulami, Sarraj, and Qushayri (who wrote in Arabic), Hujwiri is also building on the tradition of Sufi texts that came before him. In other words, he is both reproducing the discourse of Sufism based on oral and textual traditions that are available to him, and constructing a new Sufi narrative according to his own personal interpretations and beliefs. With this double-edged discourse Hujwiri not only contributes to "the construction of a coherent narrative about Sufism," but also defines the multiple ways in which this "normative" narrative of Sufism becomes gendered in the early decades of its consolidation.[12]

In examining Hujwiri's construction of gender in *Kashf al-mahjub*, I will discuss gendered references in three main categories: notable women in the Islamic tradition, examples of righteous and spiritual women, and women as tropes for sensuality (*shahvat*). Finally, I will look at Hujwiri's personal voice and narratives that reveal his open misogyny and speculate on the impact of contradictions that arise from the total picture of gender in *Kashf al-mahjub* on later discourses of Sufism.

Since one of Hujwiri's aims, in alliance with other early biographers of Sufi saints and masters, is to legitimize Sufi practices as significant expressions of the Islamic tradition, he uses *hadith* and the Qur'an to define the lawful and normative boundaries of Sufism. Within this framework, Hujwiri, following Qushayri's lead, refers to certain notable women in the Islamic tradition. A'isha, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad, appears in Hujwiri's text eight times as a *hadith* transmitter. The Prophet's daughter, Fatima, is mentioned three consecutive times as the mother of al-Hasan, al-Husayn, and Umm Kulthum. In these references, A'isha and Fatima are recognized as *Ahl al-Bayt* or the family of the Prophet and in relation to him. Though Hujwiri acknowledges the religious authority of A'isha as a *hadith* transmitter in accordance with the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, he accords neither A'isha nor Fatima a special spiritual status. However, he does accord this status to Maryam (Mary), the mother of Jesus, and Zayedeh, the handmaid of Umar, both of whom according to Hujwiri demonstrate their spiritual status through *karamat* or God's gifts.[13] The story of Maryam (Mary) receiving food from God is taken from the Qur'an and the story of Zayedeh receiving a heavenly messenger who delivers her firewood is a *hadith* transmitted by Umar ibn al-Khattab.

Yet, even in these two stories, women's *karamat* are viewed as exceptional gifts bestowed by the grace of God. As Hujwiri says: "God almighty bestowed these *karamat* on *a woman*, and accorded her the status of Mary."[14] Moreover, when one considers these two stories of women's *karamat*, among the many stories of the Qur'an and *hadith* in *Kashf al-mahjub*, one comes to the conclusion that, rather than demonstrating women's spiritual prowess, the notable women in the Islamic tradition mostly serve supporting or secondary roles in men's spiritual life and as such are dispensable in men's journey towards the ultimate truth. A clear example of this attitude is seen in Hujwiri's use of the story of Hagar and Ishmael repeated twice in the narrative of *Kashf al-mahjub*.

In both instances the story of Abraham leaving Hagar and his small child in the middle of the desert, on account of God's orders, exemplifies that a spiritual man's duty to God is greater than to his wife and children.[15] Moreover, this narrative infantilizes the woman through pairing her with her child and constructs her as the material and psychological attachment from which the spiritual man must detach.

Though mostly a compilation of stories about Sufi men and their beliefs, *Kashf al-mahjub* occasionally offers glimpses into the lives of righteous and spiritual women. Some are anonymous women with limited parabolic functions: the married peasant woman who resists the landlord's advances by reminding him of God's presence,[16] the woman standing in prayer who is stung by a scorpion forty times without showing any outward reactions,[17] the wife, who like her husband, chooses celibacy in marriage and devotes her life to God.[18] In the entire text of *Kashf al-mahjub* only three figures offer possibilities for biographical sketches of actual Sufi women. Besides Rabi'a al-Adiwiyya who is mentioned only once in a concise narrative with no introduction,[19] two women assume significant spiritual presence in *Kashf al-mahjub*, Fatima of Nishapur, as the old woman in Dhu'l-Nun's story, and Fatima, the wife of Ahmad ibn Khezruya.

In one of the stories of Dhu'l-Nun al-Misri (d. 245/860), Hujwiri relates the encounter of that renowned Sufi master with an old woman in one of his journeys from Jerusalem to Egypt.

> I saw in the distance someone with some awe-inspiring presence (*haybat*) advancing towards me and I felt compelled to ask a question. When the person came near I perceived that it was an old woman carrying a staff (*ukkaza)* and wearing a woolen garment (*jubba*). I asked her whence she came. She answered: "From God." "And whither goest thou?" "To God." I drew forth a piece of gold to offer her, but she shook her hand in my face and said: "O Dhu'l-Nun, the notion which thou hast formed of me arises from the feebleness of thy intelligence. I

work for God's sake and accept nothing unless from Him. I worship Him alone and take from Him alone." With these words, she went on her way.[20]

This is the only story in the entire *Kashf al-mahjub* where a woman assumes a powerful spiritual presence comparable, and even exceeding in this instance, a male spiritual master. The adverb *ba haybat* (awe-inspiring) coupled with the symbolism of *ukkaza* (staff) and woolen *jubba* (garment) as special Sufi paraphernalia give the woman the unmistakable representation of an experienced Sufi. Furthermore, addressing the master by name, the woman takes Dhu'l-Nun to task for not recognizing the signs and instead relying on normative gender/age assumptions that an old woman must require assistance and she cannot possibly speak from an advanced spiritual state.

Significantly, however, this powerful anonymous Sufi woman can be none other than Fatima of Nishapur who, according to Sulami's biography of early Sufi women, is also considered to be one of Dhu'l-Nun's spiritual teachers.

Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Miqsam reported with certification (*ijazatan*) from Abu Muhammad al-Husayn ibn Ali b. Khalaf from ibn Malul (a very aged shaykh who met Dhu'l-Nun al-Misri), who related: I asked [Dhu'l-Nun], "Who is the most excellent person you have ever seen?" To which he replied, "I have never seen anyone more excellent than a woman I saw in Mecca who is called *Fatima of Nishapur*. She used to discourse wonderfully on matters pertaining to the meaning of the Qur'an." I asked Dhu'l-Nun about her and he said: "She is a saint from among the friends of God, the Glorious and Mighty. She is also my teacher (*ustadhi*)."[21]

Hujwiri's anonymous version of Fatima of Nishapur is most probably based on *Kitab at-ta'arruf li-madhhab ahl al-tasawwuf* (Introducing the Way of the People of Sufism) by Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi of Bukhara (d. 380/990), which offers a longer version of the same story;[22] Sarraj and

Qushayri are both silent about Fatima and do not even include the anonymous tale relating to Fatima and Dhu'l-Nun. On the other hand, Hujwiri mentions Sulami in his *Kashf al-mahjub* four times and shows a great familiarity with his works.[23] So, Hujwiri's choice of keeping Fatima anonymous while relating a story that clearly demonstrates an old woman's spiritual prowess is intentional. This strategy is both a symptom and a cause of an ambivalence that defines the construction of gender in Sufi discourses. While not denying women's spiritual abilities, it nevertheless creates ways of undermining their presence.

Fatima, the wife of Ahmad ibn Khezruya otherwise known as Umm Ali or Fatima of Balkh in various Sufi references, is the only Sufi woman mentioned by name who receives extensive and special treatment in *Kashf al-mahjub*. Not only does Hujwiri devote most of the entry on Ahmad ibn Khezruya to Fatima, but also for once he directly acknowledges a woman's spiritual greatness. He says, "Fatima, who was his [Ahmad Khezruya's] wife, had a great status on the spiritual path (*tariqat*)."[24] The question that arises is why Hujwiri, who manages for the most part to ignore or undermine the presence of many important and notable Sufi women like Rabi'a, Fatima of Nishapur, or many others included in Sulami's biography, decides to devote so much attention to Fatima of Balkh. For one thing, Fatima (unlike Rabi'a and Fatima of Nishapur) was married. Her husband Ahmad ibn Khezruya was one of the renowned practitioners of Sufi chivalry (*futuwwat*) and had served two eminent Sufi masters of his time, Bayazid Bastami (d. 234/848 or 261/875) and Abu Hafs al-Haddad Nishapuri (d. 265/878-9), both of whom, according to Sulami, recognized and praised Fatima's spiritual knowledge and motivation.[25] Qushayri also mentions Fatima by name (Umm Ali) in the story of Ahmad asking his wife for advice about inviting one of the great men of *futuwwat* to his house.[26] However, since Hujwiri had managed to ignore his predecessors on many other occasions, the answer must lie elsewhere.

Significantly, Hujwiri's detailed account of Fatima's encounters with Bayazid is not found in any of the available earlier sources. In his account, he writes:

> Upon meeting Bayazid, Fatima unabashedly removed her veil and sat conversing fearlessly before him. Ahmad was astonished and became jealous at heart. "How can you be so impudent with Bayazid?" her husband later demanded. Fatima replied, "You are my physical nature's confidant and consort; Bayazid is my spiritual confidant. I attain my physical desire through you; through him I reach God. The fact that he doesn't need my company, but you do, demonstrates this."[27]

Why would the author of *Kashf al-mahjub*, who tries so hard to prove that the normative boundaries of Sufism are compatible with the normative boundaries of *shari'a*, choose to unveil the only woman he recognizes as a Sufi? What does this radical act signify and how does Hujwiri manage to subvert it? Since the veil is the most apparent distinction between women and men in the Islamic tradition, Fatima's unveiling can be read as an act of shedding one's gender in the spiritual domain. In other words, on the path of truth, there should be no distinction between a woman and a man. In the presence of Bayazid, Fatima no longer sees herself as a woman but as a spiritual seeker. Responding to her husband's jealous inquiry, Fatima sharply divides the physical and the spiritual worlds: in the physical world Ahmad is her consort, in the spiritual world Bayazid is her confidant.

If the story had ended here, Hujwiri's message would have indeed been radical, not only for his time and place, but also for any Islamic society of the present time. A Sufi woman would no longer be bound to social and religious gender norms that defined her conduct. She would be free to act as an equal in spiritual settings. However, Hujwiri's narrative quickly restores the norms:

> Fatima continued to behave presumptuously before Bayazid until, one day, observing a stain on her hand he remarked, "Why do you put henna on your hands?" Rebuking Bayazid, she

> said, "I was utterly free with you, Bayazid, so long as you never stared at my hand or commented upon its stain. But now that your eyes have started to observe my hands, all further communication between us is forbidden." Ahmad and his wife then returned and settled in Nishapur.[28]

The spiritual and the physical worlds cannot be separated for long. If Bayazid, the most legendary and revered Sufi master of all times, cannot keep the two worlds apart, then who could?

Even if we read this failure as Bayazid's shortcoming, we cannot ignore the fact that at the end Fatima once again loses her freedom to consort with Bayazid as an equal and is forced to give up his company. So, it seems that in Hujwiri's account, Fatima signifies simultaneously the possibility and the impossibility of a spiritual equality of genders. Defined by her sexualized and gendered body, Fatima nevertheless points to an ideal realm where gender and sexuality do not regulate spiritual relationships. However, as far as Hujwiri is concerned, Fatima, the prototype of Sufi women, can demonstrate to other Sufi women aspirants that no matter how advanced they are on the path, they can never hope to escape gender norms. At the end of his narrative, Hujwiri quotes Bayazid as saying, "whoever would wish to see a true man in the guise of a woman, let him see Fatima."[29] Thus, Hujwiri once again reminds his readers that the normative construction of a Sufi is a man and only an exceptional woman like Fatima can (in spite of her gender) aspire to this state.

Ultimately, the pious and spiritual women of Islam and Sufi tradition do not constitute the majority of references to women in *Kashf al-mahjub*. Hujwiri's book is littered with examples of women as tropes for sensuality (*shahvat*) and desire. As such, they represent the temptations Sufi men must overcome in order to embark on the path of God. Most of these women are voiceless representations of female beauty and sensuality. At times, they become a catalyst for repentance and a starting point for a spiritual quest.[30] At other times, they simply represent the temptations of the

flesh which a true Sufi must avoid.[31] Of course, Hujwiri does not invent this representation; woman as temptation and desire is an old trope, at least as old as the biblical story of Adam and Eve. Even within the boundaries of Sufi discourses, Hujwiri's negative construction of femininity as sensuality (*shahvat*) is not original; his predecessors, Sarraj and Qushayri, though, did not go as far as Hujwiri in providing a damning representation of femininity in Sufi discourses, still saw women as obstacles and deterrents on the spiritual path which was defined mainly as a male undertaking.[32] However, what makes Hujwiri's reproduction of this negative image of femininity unique, interesting, and perhaps even more damaging, is Hujwiri's personal interjections about femininity and marriage as they relate to the spiritual path.

From the very beginning of *Kashf al-mahjub*, Hujwiri writes himself into the text. Rather than posing as a detached impersonal narrator who merely records what he has heard or read from his elders, teachers, and precursors, he insists on having his individual voice and expressing his opinions on various matters. The frequent expression of "and I who am Ali ibn Uthman al-Jullabi" say, or believe, or saw such and such, which at the beginning of *Kashf al-mahjub* may have struck a reader as odd or unfamiliar, by the end of *Kashf al-mahjub* loses its odd and unfamiliar ring.

Hujwiri's opinions about women and marriage constitute one of the most revealing moments of *Kashf al-mahjub*, a book already promising by its title to uncover what is hidden or veiled. Towards the end of the book, Hujwiri opens a chapter on marriage and celibacy. As always, Hujwiri tries to present different sides of the debate. At first, he presents the arguments of those who are in favor of marriage. "Some of the Sufi shaykhs hold marriage to be desirable as a means of quelling lust….. Others hold that the object of marriage is procreation."[33] Using the *hadith* "there is nothing that profits a man so much as a believing and obedient wife," Hujwiri goes on to provide an example of such a blissful marriage. In the story related through Ibrahim Khawas (d. 291/904),[34] an old

couple married for sixty-five years, practice celibacy in marriage. The couple, who were in love as children, had to overcome oppositions and obstacles. When they were finally wed, the wife asks her husband to spend the first night praying to God in thanksgiving for their eventual union. The wife repeats her request the second night. On the third night, the husband asks the same, and this continues for sixty-five years without the consummation of marriage. Thus, even in an example seemingly supporting marriage, Hujwiri manages to prove the primacy of celibacy to a marriage that would normally entail the physical/sexual union between a woman and a man.

But Hujwiri goes even further in his defense of celibacy by blaming women for this choice. "In our time, it is impossible for anyone to have a suitable wife, whose wants are not excessive and whose demands are not unreasonable. Therefore many [men] have adopted celibacy."[35] Even at this point Hujwiri's expectations for "a believing and obedient wife" according to the Sunna, though obviously exaggerated, are not unusually misogynist. However, Hujwiri's final revelation about women as the root of all troubles (*fitna*) finally unveils his strong hostility towards women and hence his motivations for keeping Sufi women outside the gates of the discourse of Sufism.

> And in short, the first calamity (*fitna*) that befell Adam in Paradise was caused by a woman and the first trouble (*fitna*) that happened in this world, i.e., the quarrel of Abel and Cain, was also caused by a woman. And when God wanted to punish the two angels, a woman was the cause. And down to the present day all mischiefs, worldly and religious, have been caused by women. And the Prophet said, "I have not left any trouble (*fitna*) for men (after me) more damaging than women." If this is their mischief (*fitna*) outwardly then how is it inwardly?[36]

The views Hujwiri expresses in the above passage, are by no means unique to the medieval Islamic world. Although such views had no base in the Qur'an, they drew support from exegetic literature partly inspired by *isra'iliyyat* (Bible-related traditions), and partly reinforced by the *hadith*

traditions.[37] Regardless of how common this attitude was among men of Hujwiri's time in general or men in Sufi communities in particular, it is important to note that Hujwiri's text is the only early Sufi text (to my knowledge) that reproduces it and by doing so writes that into the construction of gender in Sufi discourses. Unlike Sarraj and Qushayri who write women out of the Sufi tradition without openly expressing their contempt for them, Hujwiri reveals the underlying misogyny of his own writing at the same time that he legitimizes this misogyny in Sufi discourses.

Finally, in order to prove his point that women are nothing but trouble (*fitna*), Hujwiri relates a personal story.

> After God had preserved me (Ali ibn Uthman al-Jullabi) for eleven years from the dangers of matrimony, it was my destiny to fall into trouble (*fitna*) and fall in love with a woman whom I had never seen, and I was so drowned in that for one year that my religion was near being ruined, until at last God in His bounty gave protection to my wretched heart and mercifully delivered me.[38]

Though Hujwiri's narration here is a bit obscure, it seems that he was passionately in love with a woman he married for at least a year. Significantly, Hujwiri says nothing about this mystery woman; like other examples of women as tropes for sensuality (*shahvat*), Hujwiri's wife is simply reduced to his passion. It is as if Hujwiri is writing his life to fit the mold of the stories he has told so often. His wife has no voice or characterization. Was she a "believer"? Was she "obedient"? In what sense was she not a "suitable wife"? Were her wants excessive, her demands unreasonable as Hujwiri bemoans earlier? All Hujwiri is willing to say is that "it was my destiny to fall into trouble (*fitna*) and fall in love with a woman whom I had never seen, and I was so drowned in that for one year that my religion was near being ruined." The agency of woman as *fitna* is highly ambiguous. In many of the earlier stories of women as metaphors for sensuality, men fall in love, marry, and desire women

without women inviting the attention or having a choice in the matter. As objects of desire, they play no active roles in men's life. They are simply there to be looked at, to be loved, and to be desired. So, the struggle is not between a woman and a man, but rather within a man, between his love for God and his desire for a woman. Within this context, woman as *fitna* has no agency. It is a misplaced metaphor for a man's internal struggles. However, in Hujwiri's account it is the woman who is blamed for this struggle; she is the root of all trouble (*fitna*) because she signifies male desire and sensuality.

What can we conclude from the overall construction of gender in *Kashf al-mahjub*? The picture that arises from the various examples of notable women in the Islamic tradition—righteous and spiritual women, women as tropes for sensuality, and women as the root of all trouble in Hujwiri's personal interjections—is contradictory and ambivalent. On the one hand, the spiritual seeker is mostly defined as a man, and a Sufi community is for the most part characterized as a homosocial order of brotherhood. Women frequently appear in relation to men and secondary to their status. At best, they function as transmitters of *hadith* (A'isha), metaphors for family attachments (Hagar), or mothers, daughters, and wives of important male figures. At worst, they are signs of male desire and as such the cause of all mischief "down to the present day." On the other hand, women are also occasionally shown as capable of performing spiritual miracles (*karamat* as in the stories of Mary and Zayedeh), attaining advanced spiritual stages, and even asserting their spiritual equality in encounters with renowned Sufi men (as in the stories of the anonymous old woman and Fatima of Balkh). Ultimately, even though Hujwiri openly acknowledges his contemptuous opinion of women in general, he is nevertheless unable to categorically dismiss their powerful presence in the Sufi tradition. Consequently, his gendered discourse on Sufism, in the first Persian text on this subject, leaves room for later generations to choose and develop whatever

representation of women in Sufism they find compatible with their personal views and experiences. Perhaps one could even say that Hujwiri's personal revelation of his bias against women could have been constructive for later generations of Sufis who could clearly see where he stands and decide whether or not they are willing to stand with him.

Section 2: The Hagiographies of Abu Sa'id-i Abu'l-Khayr

At the time that Hujwiri wrote *Kashf al-mahjub*, the first major survey of Sufism in Persian, hagiography was already an established genre; however, like other classical Sufi texts of the period, early hagiographies were written in Arabic. According to Shafi'i-Kadkani, the prominent scholar of Sufism in the Persian language, the oldest known hagiographies of individual Sufis in Persian are on the life of Abu Sa'id-i Abu'l-Khayr (d. 440/1049).[39] To this day, Abu Sa'id's hagiographies enjoy widespread popularity in Persian Sufi communities. The three surviving hagiographies of Abu Sa'id were compiled years after Abu Sa'id's death. But as indicated in one of the anecdotes in *Asrar al-tawhid*, at least some of the stories of the Master were recorded during his lifetime.[40]

Until recently, the only Abu Sa'id hagiography that was widely read and discussed in Sufi circles was *Asrar al-tawhid fi maqamat Shaykh Abi Sa'id* (The Secrets of [God's] Unity in the Spiritual Stations of Shaykh Abu Sa'id), written by Muhammad ibn Munavvar (compiled between 574/1179 and 588/1192). *Asrar al-tawhid* is often one of the first books recommended to a Sufi novice.[41] *Halat va sukhanan-i Shaykh Abu Sa'id-i Abu'l-Khayr* (Manners and Discourses of Abu Sa'id-i Abu'l-Khayr), written by Jamal ad-Din Abu Rawh Lutf Allah (d. 541/1147), is an earlier concise biography of Abu Sa'id that was used by the writer of *Asrar al-tawhid* and referenced by him.[42] Just recently, in 2006, Shafi'i-Kadkani published a newly discovered hagiography of Abu

Sa'id, which not only was older than *Asrar al-tawhid*, but also contained many of the anecdotes of the *Asrar al-tawhid* in a shorter and less embellished version. This newly found hagiography with no title and no author also contained many stories and poems that were not included in the two other known hagiographies of Abu Sa'id. Shafi'i-Kadkani published this hagiography, which according to him is one of the oldest known hagiographies in Persian, under the title of *Cheshidan-i ta'm-i vaqt: az miras-i irfani-i Abu Sa'id-i Abu'l-Khayr* (Tasting the Moment: From the Mystical Legacy of Abu Sa'id-i Abu'l-Khayr).[43]

Apart from their literary value, these three surviving hagiographies on Abu Sa'id together paint a vivid picture of the practice and teaching of Khurasan Sufism from the viewpoint of one of its most unorthodox, controversial, and at the same time, sincere practitioners.[44] And although the hagiographies of Abu Sa'id are products of a certain age (between 50 to 100 years after his death), a certain conventional construction (of Sufi sainthood), and personal preferences and blind spots of numerous hagiographers, they offer more information on women's lives in the Sufi communities in Khurasan than any surveys or hagiographies before them. In contrast to Hujwiri's writing, which foregrounds the gender bias and misogyny of his time one hundred years earlier, Abu Sa'id's hagiographies shed light on Sufi teachings and Sufi communities that were more receptive to women and in general more inclusive.

By focusing on the construction of gender in Abu Sa'id's hagiographies, I would like to achieve two objectives. My first aim is to make the presence of women in these hagiographies more visible. My second aim is to suggest that Abu Sa'id's Sufi teachings, which were controversial to many of his contemporaries and even to some of the future generations of Sufis, constitute the foundations of a kind of Sufi practice that was/is inclusive and egalitarian.

My approach to the construction of gender in the surviving hagiographies of Abu Sa'id will be comparative. Since most of the references to women are found in *Cheshidan-i ta'm-i vaqt* and *Asrar al-tawhid*, I will start with shared anecdotes and references to women in those texts, gradually highlighting the differences concerning the presence and treatment of women in the older hagiography of *Cheshidan-i ta'm-i vaqt* versus the later *Asrar al-tawhid*.

Subsection 1: Abu Sa'id and the Inclusivity of Khurasan Sufism

Before considering the presence of women and the construction of gender in Abu Sa'id's hagiographies, I would like to situate Abu Sa'id within the tradition of Khurasan Sufism at his time and explain the controversies surrounding his life and his Sufi practices.

Already in the early major surveys on Sufism (fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries) written by Sarraj, Qushayri, and Hujwiri, there was a sense that the golden age of Sufism had long passed and that one could no longer find "authentic" practices of Sufism comparable to the those of the old masters like Junayd (d. 298/910) and Bayazid. As a historian of Sufism, Ahmet Karamustafa believes that such complaints about the "disappearance of 'true' Sufism" served more than just literary functions and "most probably pointed to a real social development."[45] According to Karamustafa, "Sufism had become popular, and the number of aspirants to the Sufi way was on the rise, but it had become notoriously difficult to differentiate between the authentic Sufis and those who thought they were Sufis or made themselves out to be Sufis."[46] This confusion about diverse manifestations of Sufism in the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries explains the need for the construction of a normative discourse of Sufism through the various surveys and treatises. But it also explains the limitations of such surveys in defining "authentic" Sufism through excluding what was

deemed “unorthodox” and/or disturbed the “norms.” Abu Sa’id’s life and teachings tested that limitation.

Abu Sa’id lived most of his life in the small town of Mayhana (in present-day Turkmenistan close to the borders of Iran). Like many young men of his generation he travelled to nearby cities (Sarakhs and Marv) and studied the conventional knowledge of his time (Qur’an, *hadith*, *fiqh*, and *kalam*) and was on his way to becoming a scholar. However, upon meeting with a Sufi master, Shaykh Abu’l-Fadl Hasan-i Sarakhsi, he abandoned scholarly pursuits and devoted his life to spiritual practices.

Abu Sa’id’s spiritual life is divided in two seemingly opposing periods, one of extreme asceticism, the other of extreme indulgence and extravagance. In the first period, which lasted somewhere between fourteen to twenty years, while mostly under the direction of his master Abu’l-Fadl Hasan (and after his passing under the care of Abu’l-Abbas Qassab), he meditated, prayed, fasted, avoided all manners of comfort and pleasure, wandered in mountains and deserts, and sought solitude. In the second half of his spiritual life (which probably lasted thirty to forty years), by then a mature full- fledged training master with permission to establish Sufi lodges and train disciples, Abu Sa’id preached from a wooden seat rather than a pulpit, quoted poetry instead of the Qur’an or *hadith*, dressed and ate extravagantly, gave lavish banquets whenever he could, and often invited musicians and singers and engaged in *sama’*. The transformation of Abu Sa’id from an ascetic to a libertine was not only recorded in his hagiographies but also noted by writers as far away as Andalus (present-day Spain). Ibn Hazm, an Andalusian religious thinker and scholar who was one of Abu Sa’id’s contemporaries, notes in one of his books (*al-Fasl fi al-milal wa-al-ahwa’wa-al-nihal*):

> We have also heard that in our time there is a man in Nishapur known as a Sufi, who is called Abu Sa’id Abu’l-Khayr.…[He] sometimes wears wool clothing and at other times wears silk

(which is forbidden/*haram* for men), sometimes prays more than one thousand times and at other times does not even perform his obligatory prayer, and this is pure infidelity. We seek refuge in God from such deviancy.[47]

It is not at all surprising that Abu Sa'id stirred controversy at this time when there was a collective effort by scholars of Sufism and some of its practitioners to legitimize Sufism within the boundaries of Islamic *shari'a* and delineate the normative boundaries of Sufism. Among his contemporaries, only Hujwiri acknowledges him in his survey and devotes some pages to his teachings. Both Qushayri in his *Risala* (Treatise) and Abd Allah Ansari (d. 481/1089) in his *Tabaqat al-sufiyya* (Generations of Sufis) exclude him without even explaining why.[48]

However, I think that the controversy surrounding Abu Sa'id's practice of Sufism not only has significant bearing on how Khurasan Sufism is defined and practiced, but also on how inclusive and subversive Sufism can ultimately be in relation to what is excluded by social norms and hierarchies. The treatment of gender in Abu Sa'id's hagiographies therefore should be considered in light of his practice and teachings of Sufism.

As in any Sufi hagiography, there is an effort in the hagiographies of Abu Sa'id, two of them written down by his descendants many years after his death,[49] to construct his image as a Sufi saint with miraculous powers. In countless anecdotes, his hagiographers emphasize Abu Sa'id's ability to read minds (*firasa*) as evidence of his miraculous powers (*karamat*) that he used over and over again to disarm his enemies and detractors and to turn skeptics into believing followers. Ultimately, his hagiographers are not quite successful in making Abu Sa'id into a conventional Sufi saint. Moreover, within the pages of the hagiographies, the actual practice of Sufism and its transmission through day-to-day training point to a much more complex system of belief that challenges the foundations of human selfhood and defies social norms and conduct.

The cornerstone of Abu Sa'id's teaching is nothingness (*nisti*). He says: "I have not invited you to Truth (God) but to your nothingness; for His existence is enough."[50] Nothingness as defined by Abu Sa'id is giving up the illusion of self. To do that a Sufi aspirant must let go of every desire, thought, or action that is rooted in self-interest. "Wherever *you are* is hell, wherever *you are not* is heaven."[51] Nothingness is not only the ultimate goal of Abu Sa'id's Sufism, it also defines the relationship between the master and the disciple. He says: "It is easier to drag along a mountain by a hair than to emerge from the self by oneself."[52] In other words, how can self be the instrument of his/her destruction? It is therefore the master's job to identify the disciple's sense of self and to assign him/her tasks that would break the disciple's bubble of selfhood.

Since the aim of Abu Sa'id's teaching is nothingness, no one is excluded from it. The position of nothingness is also the position of "*tawhid*," God's oneness. There is only one "true" existence and the rest are manifestations of the One. Abu Sa'id, therefore, approaches others with love, humility, and acceptance. He refrains from judging people and he asks his followers to do the same. Within the pages of the three hagiographies of Abu Sa'id,[53] we see him converse and engage with people of different classes, religions, and convictions. He is as at ease with the people of status, power, and learning as he is with the illiterate poor, the marginalized, and the unwanted. Abu Sa'id is an iconoclast in many ways. He shows little reverence (if any) for the social etiquette and the religious norms that define his time.

With this understanding of Abu Sa'id's practice of Sufism, it is not surprising to find a different treatment of gender in Abu Sa'id's hagiographies than in any Sufi texts before him. Thus, we see glimpses of women in the hagiographies of Abu Sa'id, not as token exceptional women or purely stereotypical/ metaphorical representations as depicted in the surveys of Qushayri, Hujwiri,

and others, but as ordinary women Abu Sa'id encounters in his everyday life, who at times become disciples and students of Sufism.

Subsection 2: Women in Hagiographies of Abu Sa'id

As I said earlier, we see glimpses of women in the hagiographies of Abu Sa'id that we do not see anywhere else in the Sufi surveys and biographies. While most of the stories and anecdotes in the hagiographies of Abu Sa'id revolve around the interaction between the Master and his male teachers, disciples, and visitors, women are nevertheless present on the peripheries of this homosocial order as wives, daughters, audience members who attend Abu Sa'id's sermons or even *sama'* sessions, disciples, and residents of the town.

Abu Sa'id's wife is mentioned twice in *Cheshidan-i ta'm-i vaqt* and *Asrar al-tawhid* as the mother of Bu Taher (Abu Taher), Abu Sa'id's son and eventual heir.[54] She is first referenced in relation to Abu Sa'id's ascetic practices. According to the master, he was still struggling to completely shed his existence when one night he asked his wife to tie his feet with a rope, fasten the rope to a spike, hang him upside down, and leave the room. Abu Sa'id then started reciting the Qur'an upside down. He kept reciting even after his eyes started to bleed, until he came to the verse, "God shall be your sufficiency against them, for He is all knowing and all hearing." At that point, something happened and his prayer was answered. "We called Bu Taher's mother to come and bring us down."[55]

Abu Sa'id turns to his wife in his most vulnerable and trying state. Undoubtedly there is great trust and understanding between them. But what this short anecdote also reveals is the degree to which Abu Sa'id's wife shares the spiritual turmoil and suffering of her husband. One can only

imagine her sitting behind the door, most probably hearing Abu Sa'id reciting the Qur'an upside down, anxiously waiting for her husband to call her. The story moreover challenges our understanding of ascetic practices. Asceticism is usually understood as "self-denial or self-mortification." Whether it is undertaken under the direction of a spiritual master or on one's own, it is a solitary affair. In Abu Sa'id's case however, the ascetic practice turns into a shared experience. Abu Sa'id's wife partakes in the experience. She suffers from sleep deprivation, she suffers from awareness of her husband's suffering, and she suffers from the uncertainty of the outcome. Now the more intriguing question is whether or not Abu Sa'id's wife also partakes in the spiritual realization of her husband that results from the ascetic practice. Is she somehow enlightened as well? What if any is her spiritual realization at the time she rushes in to bring her bleeding husband down and untie his feet? Although the hagiographers are not interested in her journey, they do provide clues to her spiritual state. The second and final entry on Abu Sa'id's wife is in relation to a woman named Ishi Nili who at the culmination of a lengthy story comes to Abu Sa'id to ask for forgiveness and to become a follower. The Master then says: "Take her to Bu Taher's mother to robe her in a Sufi garment (*khirqa*)."[56] In Sufi literature and terminology, the person who bestows a *khirqa* on someone is usually a master/shaykh or a representative of a master/shaykh and standing in for him. Abu Sa'id's wife here is clearly standing in for Abu Sa'id and representing him probably for the entire community of women followers who, because of the religious and moral codes of conduct between the sexes, cannot have a more direct and physical access to the Master.

Elsewhere, the hagiographies of Abu Sa'id shed more light on the segregation of the sexes in the Sufi lodges (*khaniqah*) in the fifth/eleventh and sixth/twelfth centuries. Both in *Cheshidan-i ta'm-i vaqt* and *Asrar al-tawhid* we have references to women attending Abu Sa'id's lectures and the *sama'* sessions on the rooftop. This means that Abu Sa'id and his male congregation were seated in a

courtyard. Of course, given the geographical information about the two towns referenced in the hagiographies (Mayhana and Nishapur), it is hard to imagine that the outdoor sessions would be held all year round, especially during the winter. So, in all probability, this was a temporary arrangement dependent on the weather, giving women only limited and occasional access to the Master's sessions and ritual participation.

Still, the presence of women on the rooftop created a spatial arrangement that gave women a visual advantage; they could look down and see the men in the courtyard whereas men, even if they looked up, could only see indistinguishable veiled women sitting on the rooftop. So, if we follow the direction of the gaze from the rooftop to the courtyard, from the women onlookers to the male participants, it was as if the men were on a stage playing to the female audience. However, the dynamics of spectatorship and surveillance are activated in both directions. The fact that the women have a better view of the men's bodies does not mean that their gaze is more comprehensive or powerful, although according to what follows, that was certainly a fear, if a projected one, of the male teachers.

Hujwiri cites this spatial arrangement as one of his objections to *sama'*, at least for the novice male Sufis. At the end of *Kashf al-mahjub*, while talking about whether the practice of *sama'* is sanctioned by all Sufi masters he says: "And I, Ali Ibn Uthman al-Jullabi, prefer that they would not let the novice practice *sama'* so that their instincts will not be activated, since there is great danger in that. And the biggest danger is that women view men from a roof or somewhere else while they are in *sama'* and from this, difficult veils will befall the listeners [participants of *sama'*]."[57] While in Abu Sa'id's hagiographies there are several mentions of women attending the sessions on the rooftop, there is only one anecdote that directly engages the issue of women's gaze and men's performance in *sama'*.

Although the writer of *Asrar* refers to women's presence on the rooftop three times in his hagiography, he does not do so as a way of showing that women's presence was somehow distracting for male followers. Instead, in *Asrar*, the emphasis is on Abu Sa'id's *karamat* (miraculous deeds) in either preventing a woman's or a child's fall from the rooftop and delivering them from death or knowing by way of *karamat* that somebody's daughter is sitting on the roof and listening to a certain lecture.[58]

However, the presence of small children on the rooftop with their mothers adds a new dimension to the spatial arrangement. While older male children sometimes accompanied their fathers to Sufi sessions—according to the hagiographies, Abu Sa'id himself accompanied his father to a *sama'* session when he was young—the smaller children attended the Sufi sessions with their mothers on the rooftop. This raises the question of whether or not women could participate in the Sufi gatherings while attending to their children's needs. The question continues to persist in contemporary times where, in Sufi houses in Iran, women are still recognized as the primary caregivers of children. However, there is also evidence of women as participants in spite of segregated spaces and the distractions of children. In one of the anecdotes in *Asrar* we read, "In one of the sessions a woman fell into a state and threw herself from the roof. The Master directed his attention; she was suspended in air. Women reached out and pulled her back to the roof. They looked and saw that her skirt was caught on a nail."[59] We do not know what prompted the woman to throw herself from the roof, but the text makes it clear that what happened to her related to her "state" (*halat*). Thus, it is possible to infer that the woman was participating in a Sufi ritual (possibly *sama'*) when she fell from the rooftop.

But by far the most intriguing and illuminating anecdote about women's presence in *sama'* sessions is related in *Cheshidan-i ta'm-i vaqt*, which directly engages the issue of women's gaze and men's performance in *sama'*.

> And he said that one day there was a *sama'* session. As hard as the Qawwal (singer/musician) tried, the *sama'* would not take place. The Shaykh called his trusted servant and gave him his staff and said: "Turn this into a face and figure and make it so that no one knows and clothe it in a *chador* (a long veil covering head to toe) and put it on a corner of the roof." The servant did as instructed. No sooner had he done so, the men starting wailing and crying and throwing their *khirqa* on the ground. When the day ended, the Shaykh said: "O servant go and unveil your work so that the Sufis know to whom they have been crying and wailing?"[60]

The anecdote clearly distinguishes between *sama'* as a ritual performed in a state of ecstasy and rapture versus *sama'* as a self-displaying male performance for a female audience sitting on a roof. It is important to note that unlike Hujwiri, Abu Sa'id does not ban either *sama'* or women's presence on the rooftop because of the possibility of the false practice of *sama'*. Rather in this anecdote, Abu Sa'id teaches his disciples through an artful deception that *sama'* as pure performance is meaningless.

However, the possibility of *sama'* as a male performance in a courtyard for a female audience sitting on a rooftop raises questions about women's participation in Sufi rituals and whether or not women are mostly understood as audiences rather than practitioners of Sufi rituals. It is important to note that the segregation of the sexes in public spaces like the Sufi houses, and a religious/cultural prohibition against women singing and dancing in public gatherings, forces the male gender to embody the Sufi ritual of *sama'* and creates a possibility of a gendered

division/dichotomy between the performers and the audience members. In fact, one can argue that the performativity of *sama'* begins with the women's gaze from the rooftop and their special positioning as an audience. This division is later carried into the contemporary period through Western audiences' fascination with *sama'* practice and the willingness of some Sufi groups like the Mevlevi order to turn the ritual of *sama'* into a performance act on stage.[61] The Western audience's gaze therefore could be viewed as a substitution for the women's gaze, replaying a gendered scenario.

In Abu Sa'id's teachings, however, *sama'* as performance has no meaning. *Sama'* in Arabic means listening, hearing, and audition. In Sufi terminology *sama'* refers to the state of ecstasy or *wajd* brought on by listening to music and Sufi poetry and/or chanting of the *zikr* (the repetition of the name of God or phrases describing Him), culminating in a kind of ecstatic dance (any kind of movement from whirling to the repetitious movements of the limbs, the head, and the body). The aim of *sama'* is to let go of the self (to forget oneself), even if momentarily, and to celebrate the one true existence. As such, *sama'* is an intense form of prayer. In one of the anecdotes in *Asrar al-tawhid*, Abu Sa'id and his disciples are in a *sama'* session when the muezzin (the person who calls for prayer) sounded the call for the noonday prayers. Seeing that the Shaykh is not heeding the call for prayers and continues in the state of *sama'*, a man comes to the gathering and shouts "Prayers! Prayers!" The Shaykh replies: "We are performing the prayers," and goes on dancing.[62]

Abu Sa'id's understanding of *sama'* as prayers is not, however, shared by all practitioners of Sufism before or after him. In fact, the ritual of *sama'* is the most controversial ritual of Sufism to date, forcing many proponents or opponents of the ritual to write either for or against it. But the question of women partaking in *sama'* has not been part of this controversy. For one thing, the segregation of sexes in the Sufi houses guaranteed that women could not participate in *sama'*

sessions with men. Yet, since there was no apparent prohibition against women doing *sama'* in their own space, it also made it possible for women to participate in the ritual if they were so inclined. The example of a woman falling from the rooftop, possibly in the state of ecstasy, is one example.[63] We also have reports of women entering a *sama'* session in the seventh/thirteenth century in Konya (in present-day Turkey) and joining the men in performing *sama'*, which was evidently met with fierce opposition by the shaykh presiding over the *sama'* session.[64] During the same period, we also have reports of Rumi holding weekly sessions in the house of one of the nobles of Konya for noble women of the town. The session apparently started with a lecture by Rumi and proceeded by the women playing music, singing, and eventually participating in a *sama'* session.[65] Even if we do not consider Shams ad-Din Ahmad Aflaki (the thirteenth-century biographer of Rumi) as a reliable source for such reports, we can still view them as evidence that women's *sama'* was an issue discussed and debated in the Sufi community of the seventh/thirteenth century in Konya, over two hundred years after Hujwiri and Abu Sa'id.

Although we can only speculate at women's participation in rituals like *sama*' in Abu Sa'id's time, there is no denying that women as Sufi disciples had a noticeable presence in Abu Sa'id's community. As mentioned earlier while discussing Abu Sa'id's wife, a woman named Ishi Nili, appears in all three hagiographies of Abu Sa'id as a religious woman from a well-respected family of Nishapur who eventually (after a period of trial and tribulation) becomes one of the devoted disciples of the Master. The three versions of the anecdote relating to Ishi Nili are remarkably similar. She is a devoted ascetic from a wealthy illustrious family of Nishapur who lives with a maidservant and who has not left her house for forty years. Ishi Nili's maid goes to one of Abu Sa'id's sessions to listen to the Master. In *Asrar*'s and *Cheshidan*'s versions, the maid goes to the sermon at the behest of Ishi Nili, who has heard so much about Abu Sa'id. In *Halat*'s version, the

maid goes on her own accord. When she returns from the sermon, Ishi Nili asks her to relate what she has heard. The only thing the servant remembers is a folksy quatrain about buying wine, playing *barbat* (lute, a musical string instrument), and not giving in to life's woes and sorrows.

I had one *dang* and a half, but a *habba* short.

Two pitchers of wine I bought, a trifle short.

On my lute the high string and the low are gone.

So, don't tell me of the *qalandar*'s life and woes.[66]

Ishi is horrified and indignant at hearing what she thinks of as a base, cheap, folksy poem recited by a respected religious/spiritual leader and orders her maid to wash out her mouth.

That night, when Ishi goes to bed, she wakes up from a frightful dream and feels pain in her eyes. Ishi, who is known for her eye remedies in the community, tries to treat her eyes, but for twenty days she continues to suffer from the pain without finding a cure. Finally, in her dream she hears a voice telling her, "If you wish your eyes to get better, go seek the approval of the Shaykh of Mayhana and win his precious heart." She sends her maid with some silver coins to the Master with instructions to deliver the coins without any further explanations. When the maid comes before the Master and presents him with the silver coins, Abu Sa'id is cleaning his teeth with a toothpick. He tells the maid: "Take this toothpick to the lady and tell her to stir the toothpick in water and bathe her eyes with the water so that her outward sight may be cured. And ask her to remove from her heart disapproval and blame towards this community [Sufis] so that her inner sight may also be cured." When the maid reports back to Ishi, she takes the toothpick and bathes her eyes as instructed by the Master. She is immediately cured. The next day she takes whatever she owns and leaves her house for the first time after forty years to see Shaykh Abu Sa'id. She repents and is accepted by the Master.

Clearly, Ishi Nili is the main focus of the anecdote. She is one of very few women who are identified by name in the hagiographies of Abu Sa'id. While we have numerous other stories about how male followers of Abu Sa'id come to believe in him, Ishi Nili's story is unique in relating a woman disciple's journey of belief. What makes Ishi Nili so special as to be included in the hagiographies, we may ask, while so many other women disciples of the Master are treated only in passing and often anonymously? Ishi is an upstanding member of the community not only on account of her religious piety and her family status, but also because of her reputation as a healer. She is also an older woman (she has not left her house for forty years), apparently without a husband or children. In a way, Ishi is already an exception to the traditional definition of respected womanhood (as a mother and a wife). The majority of the women who come into contact with the Master do so as wives and daughters of male disciples. Ishi is an independent woman who is financially secure (on account of her family wealth) and who serves her community as a healer. Her independent existence and her social standing make her personal journey of faith unique and important to the hagiographers of her time and later periods.

Ishi's maidservant also plays an important role in the story. She is Ishi's point of contact with the outside world. But the maid is not as learned as her mistress, who most probably has some knowledge of the Qur'an and the *hadith*. So, the fact that Abu Sa'id's sermons contain something that is easily accessible even to lay, uneducated people, is very significant. The Sufism of Abu Sa'id is not the path of the elite, urban, educated class. It is the path of inclusion, addressing all people from all walks of life: the maid, the prostitute, the slave, the drunkard singer, and the destitute musician as well as the learned and the elite. Not all of these people would become followers or disciples of the Master, but they could all benefit from him according to their capacity.

The folksy quatrain that the maid remembers by heart and repeats for her mistress can be interpreted in many ways, especially since we do not know the context in which it was uttered by Abu Sa'id. There is in fact an affinity between this quatrain and the quatrains (*rubaiyat*) of Umar Khayyam (515-520/1124-1129), the celebrated poet of Nishapur who was born at the time when Abu Sa'id was already an old man. In Abu Sa'id's poem, the speaker buys, with whatever little money he has, two pitchers of wine, and plays on his *barbat* (lute), and cares little for the sorrow of this world. One could see how this poem and other similar verses used by Abu Sa'id in his sermons would anger the religious clergy and puzzle or even frustrate the supporters of the Master. Is Abu Sa'id advocating a kind of hedonism often associated with Khayyam? Today, many scholars of Khayyam suggest that we read him as a mystic and not as a "Greek philosopher" interested in the pleasures of the moment.[67] If we situate the poem within the context of Abu Sa'id's teachings, we can read the poem as "an invitation to nothingness," asking us to lighten our burden of life by recognizing the insignificance of our lives and its sorrows, and forgetting ourselves even if only for a moment. Drinking wine and playing the *barbat* are signposts for the process of letting go of oneself. We have no way of knowing what Ishi's maid thought of the poem or took away from it. However, we know that she memorized it and it was in fact the only token she could bring back from the sermon she attended. But Ishi's reaction to the poem and to her maid who delivers it shows us that she initially rejects Abu Sa'id's inclusivity and his invitation to letting go.

The final encounter of Ishi and Abu Sa'id and the manner in which she was accepted by the Master have significant variations according to the three hagiographies. While in all versions of the story, Ishi takes all her valuable belongings to the Master and says: "I have repented and have cleared my heart from all antagonism and judgment," and in all versions Abu Sa'id asks her to serve this community (of the Sufis) so that she would be esteemed (beloved) in both worlds, in *Cheshidan*

and *Asrar*, Abu Sa'id orders her to be robed in the Sufi garment (*khirqa*) by Abu Taher's mother (his wife). In *Halat*, however, while there is no mention of the *khirqa*, the story ends with an even greater acknowledgment: "Ishi did what was asked of her and served the Sufi community and with the help and attention of the Shaykh she became one of the spiritual leaders of Nishapur."[68] In *Asrar* this acknowledgment is slightly modified making her gender and the gender segregation of the Sufi community more visible: "In accordance with the Shaykh's instructions, Ishi went off and put on the mystic robe and occupied herself waiting upon the veiled [women] of this community. And whatever she possessed, her house, land, and other things besides, she gave away. Thus, she attained a high rank on this path and became the leader of the Sufis in Nishapur."[69] By situating Ishi within the women's community, *Asrar*'s author also qualifies her leadership position in the Sufi community, implicitly suggesting perhaps that Ishi's leadership is also confined to the women of the Sufi community. Whatever we decide about Ishi's spiritual leadership in the Sufi community of Nishapur (whether her leadership is confined to women or whether it includes men as well), there is no question that Ishi's story provides a clear evidence of women's full-fledged membership and spiritual leadership in Abu Sa'id's Sufi community of fifth/eleventh century Khurasan.

Another notable example of Sufi women mentioned by name in Abu Sa'id hagiographies appears only in *Asrar*. Someone by the name of Khaje Mas'ad relates the story of his grandmother Sayena and his mother Rahati. In the anecdote, Sayena takes Rahati, her daughter (who is twelve or thirteen years old), to the Master while he is in Nishapur. The Master asks the mother and daughter to give a banquet for the Sufis. The language of the text is ambiguous as to who responds to the Master. In most probability, it is Sayena who responds, being the older woman and the adult in charge of her adolescent daughter. It is also difficult to imagine a twelve-year-old girl in fifth/eleventh century Nishapur to be as bold, forthcoming, astute, and spiritually attuned as the

exchanges in the anecdote suggest. When Sayena replies that they do not have any money, the Master asks them to beg for the money. As soon as the Master gives this order, Sayena turns to Abu Sa'id and says: "I'm going to prepare a banquet for the Sufis, give me something!" The Shaykh gives her his shirt and his mantle. Sayena then proceeds to take the shirt and the mantle to another mother and daughter staying in an inn, relating to them the exchanges between herself and Abu Sa'id and asking for money.

However, even after she receives money (in the form of a bracelet and a necklace) for the shirt and the mantle, she finds a way of persuading the women who had paid for Abu Sa'id's personal belongings to return the items while still offering their gift of money for the banquet.

> When we had sat there for a while, I said: "This clothing of the Shaykh is speaking to me. Do you hear what it says?"
>
> They replied: 'No, we don't.'
>
> I said: "It says: I cannot suffer anything or anyone. Either I'm here or someone else is. Do you think you can handle this?"
>
> They said: "No."
>
> I said: "You must find a solution."
>
> They went into a room and brought out the mantle and the shirt. Then they kissed them and placing them before me, said: "You deserve this more than we do, but keep the bracelets and the necklace."
>
> We rose and returned to the Shaykh. Placing the mantle and shirt and the bracelets and the necklace before him, we said: "Arrange a banquet for the Sufis, as you see fit."
>
> The Shaykh ordered the banquet to be prepared and the Shaykh's mantle and shirt were cut into pieces.[70]

The anecdote clearly shows that Sayena is a formidable woman. Compared to numerous anecdotes in *Asrar* and other hagiographies where the male visitors of Abu Sa'id usually find themselves ill-equipped to respond to the Master and/or understand him, Sayena shows no sign of intimidation or inadequacy. Instead, she is more than ready and eager to rise to the challenge Abu Sa'id throws at her. As in many other spiritual traditions, the act of begging in Sufi paths is an exercise in humility. But in this anecdote the emphasis is on Sayena's shrewdness in carrying out the task assigned to her.[71]

The anecdote on Sayena does not end here but continues to the next story related by her grandson Mas'ad. This time, Sayena visits Khaje Mozaffar Nowqani, one of the Sufi masters and a contemporary of Abu Sa'id.

> They talked together. Sayena spoke on the subject of 'annihilation' (*fana*) and Khaje Mozaffar spoke of 'subsistence' (*baqa*). Khaje Mozaffar was greatly pleased by Sayena's words and said: "Whoever is in agreement with you, is in agreement with *Haq* (the Truth) and whoever opposes you, opposes *Haq* (the Truth)."[72]

In this story Sayena proves to be more than equal to a Sufi master in discussing the advanced spiritual states of *fana* (annihilation in God) and *baqa* (subsistence in God), to the point where Khaje Mozaffar praises her words. In the hagiographies of the period, Sayena is a remarkable and unique example of Sufi women contemporaries of Abu Sa'id who not only exhibit advanced knowledge of the Sufi path, but also have the freedom to seek the companionship and conversation of other Sufi masters.

Curiously, while there are several sources for Khaje Mozaffar, his Sufi lodge and his relationship with Abu Sa'id, there is no mention of Sayena or her grandson Mas'ad in other hagiographies or Sufi sources of the period. Hujwiri mentions in *Kashf al-mahjub* Khaje Mozaffar's

son by the name of Ahmad. We do not know if Ahmad and Mas'ad are the same person and, if so, why his name somehow was transformed in the retelling and the recording of the anecdote. Perhaps Mas'ad was another name by which he was known. Whatever the case, it is only through a man's story of his genealogy that we come across a Sufi woman of Sayena's stature in Abu Sa'id's hagiographies.

Aside from Abu Sa'id's wife (Abu Taher's mother), Ishi Nili, and Sayena, who are not only named in the hagiographies but also treated in some detail, in *Asrar*, there are also two very similar anecdotes about an old woman in Marv (a major city on the Silk Road, today in Turkmenistan). In the first anecdote, she is called Bibi Sarraf, in the second Bibi Sayyar. As with the story of Abu Taher's mother, these two are also quoted from Shaykh Abu Sa'id himself, which makes the anecdotes more noticeable and significant for Sufi scholars and Sufi aspirants of later periods.

> Our Shaykh has said:
>
> I was in the city of Marv and met Bibi Sarraf. She said: "Oh Shaykh, He doesn't let anyone in the whole world offer me a drink of water or greet me with *salam*. Moreover, while men at large all wish to escape from themselves, if only for one moment, I wish to know, if only for one moment, just where I stand."
>
> At the end of her life a fire welled up inside her and consumed her.[73]

In the second, *Asrar* reports:

> Our Shaykh has said:
>
> I was in Marv. There was an old lady there called Bibiyak Sayyar. She came before me and said: "Oh Bu Sa'id, I have come to complain of an injustice."
>
> Our Shaykh said: "Tell me what it is."

She replied: “People pray God not to abandon them to themselves, even for the space of the blinking of an eye. For thirty years, I have been asking to be left to myself, if only for the blinking of an eye, so that I might see where I am, or if I really am at all. And it still has not happened.”[74]

There is an old Sufi prayer that is uttered occasionally after a ritual vocal *zikr*: “Oh God, do not leave us to ourselves even for a moment or less.” Bibi’s complaint, on the other hand, seems to be contrary to the wish and prayer of all Sufis. She wants to be left to herself for a moment so that she can see where she stands, where she is, or if she really is at all. In the first anecdote, there is also a sense that she is cut off from others, meaning that God has cut her off from others and would not let anyone get close to her. Also at the end of the first anecdote there is a clear indication of her total annihilation in “the fire that consumes her.” There is something real and relatable in Bibi’s statements. Whereas, we often hear mystics talk about their longing for their annihilation in God, we do not have an understanding of what this process of losing oneself in God entails. Bibi speaks of the state of bewilderment and disorientation resulting from being lost to oneself. “Where am I?” or “Who am I?” are genuine questions of a self in the process of annihilation. In the second anecdote, she also talks about this process as “an injustice,” or oppression. The Arabic word she uses is *tazallum*, protesting oppression. Being cut off from others and being lost to oneself can be easily characterized as oppression. But using the language of oppression for “annihilation” or “God’s attention” is also ironic and humorous in that it is an oppression most desired by Sufis. The anecdotes on Bibi once again reveal an advanced Sufi who can hold her own in the company of Sufi masters and who can communicate her impossible predicament in the process of annihilation with candor and a sense of humor.

Aside from introducing Sayena and Bibi Sayyar or Sarraf, the hagiography of *Asrar* also includes two sayings by Sufi women of prior generations, one by Sa'idat al-Sufiya and one by the renowned mystic Rabi'a al-Adawiyya.[75] As we have seen earlier in this chapter, relating at least one story from Rabi'a has been the tradition of Sufi biography compilers from the earliest times. But the anecdote on Sa'idat al-Sufiya carries its own significance. Unlike Rabi'a, who is simply called by her name without any introduction, assuming that the Sufi audience is already familiar with her, Sa'idat al-Sufiya is introduced as one of the women recluses (*nasekat*) mentioned in Sulami's *Tabaqat al-nasekat* (the classes of women recluses). *Tabaqat al-nasekat* is most probably Sulami's book *Dhikr an-niswa al-muta 'abbidat as sufiyyat*, on early Sufi women, recently discovered by Mahmud Muhammad at-Tanahi and translated by Rkia E. Cornell.[76] However, there is only one Sa'idat in Sulami's surviving manuscript, Sa'ida Bint Zayd, subtitled "The Sister of Hammad ibn Zayd," with one anecdote that bears no similarity to the anecdote recounted in *Asrar*.[77] Whether or not Sa'idat al-Sufiya and Sa'ida Bint Zayd are the same person or not, two conclusions can be drawn from the mention of Sa'idat al-Sufiya. First, Sulami's work on early Sufi women is introduced to the Persian-speaking world through this anecdote. (To my knowledge this is the earliest mention of Sulami's work on Sufi women in Persian Sufi texts.) Second, in the name Sa'idat al-Sufiya, "al-Sufiya" acts as a description or an adjective as in similar examples in Sulami's book on Sufi women: Rayhanat al-Valehe (Rayhana the Enraptured) or Ghufayrat al-Abida (Ghufayra the Worshipper) or Mu'nisat al-Sufiya (Mu'nisat the Sufi). This is also the first instance in a Persian Sufi text where the word Sufi (or Sufiya) is attached to a woman's name.

The words Sufi and woman are also paired in another hagiography of Abu Sa'id (*Cheshidan*) in relation to an anecdote in which a Sufi woman (*zan-e sufi*) is verbally abused by a man. When she gets angry, the man says: "If you cannot carry a heavy load, then take off the robe of heavy lifters

(meaning the robe of Sufis)."[78] When Abu Sa'id hears of the exchange, he enjoys the man's response so much that he has him repeat it to his followers. In *Asrar*'s version of the story, the entire community of Abu Sa'id's male followers assume the role of the Sufi woman in the earlier story, while a Sufi by the name of Hamzeh lectures them on what it means to be a Sufi.[79] Knowing that the Sufi woman anecdote is probably an older version of the story, one can only speculate as to why the writer of *Asrar* decides to change the gender dynamic of the story while embellishing it with more details. Is it because a Sufi woman cannot be an exemplar of a Sufi in a way a male Sufi can be? Whatever the cause of this transformation, reading the two versions of the story together diffuses the gender question posited by each anecdote alone. If we did not have access to the second version for instance, we might read the Sufi woman version of the anecdote as keeping with a male expectation for subordination and for rationalizing the abuse of women. On the other hand, the *Asrar* version of the story once again normalizes the gender of a Sufi as male and writes women out of the equation. However, reading both versions of the story together makes it abundantly clear that Sufi teaching applies to all Sufis regardless of their gender and other differences. The focus on both anecdotes is on *soluk,* or the "refining of temperament," in which state the Sufi learns to accept others' treatment of her/him without expecting fairness in return while always striving to be kind and fair in response.[80]

Section 3: Conclusion

I started this chapter with an overview of women's representation in the early Arabic surveys, biographies, and other historical writings of Sufism. The discovery and the subsequent publication of Sulami's fourth/tenth century manuscript on *Early Sufi Women* has opened a new perspective on

women's participation in the early practice of Sufism. However, despite Sulami's influence and widespread readership in Sufi circles, early Persian texts of Sufism do not contain either translations (whole or partial) of Sulami's manuscript on women or attempt to emulate him by compiling a similar biography devoted entirely to women Sufi practitioners. Rather, the Persian biographers and compilers used the preferred methodology of the canon of early Sufi texts, namely treating women's participation in Sufism more as an exception than a rule.

Still, looking at examples of early Persian historical writings on Sufism, one can see distinct differences in the construction of gender and traces of women's participation in these texts. On the one hand, Hujwiri's *Kashf al-mahjub* (the oldest Persian treatise on Sufism) reveals the underlying misogyny of its writer at the same time as he weaves this misogyny in the very construction of gender in Sufi discourses. Although Hujwiri cannot completely deny women's presence and their contribution to the Sufi discourses, he minimizes their inclusion by emphasizing their sensuality and the danger they pose to believers. On the other hand, *Asrar al-tawhid* (the most noted and celebrated hagiography of the Sufi Master Abu Sa'id Abu'l-Khayr) and *Cheshidan-i ta'm vaqt* (a recently discovered and published hagiography of Abu Sa'id) provide a window (however small) to women's participation and the construction of gender in the Sufi community of Abu Sa'id in the sixth/twelfth century. The scattered references to Sufi women in these texts tell us that in spite of numerous social/religious limitations, women were recognized as practitioners of Sufism. The phrase *zan-e sufi* (Sufi woman) in one of the hagiographies is an important testimony to this fact. Equally significant is the recording of women's presence during Sufi rituals (*sama'* sessions or sermons) on the rooftops of the Sufi lodges. Moreover, most of the women discussed in these texts—Abu Taher's mother (Abu Sa'id's wife), Ishi Nili, Sayena, and Bibi Sayyar or Sarraf—are depicted as advanced spiritual practitioners or spiritual teachers.

Nevertheless, what we miss in these accounts of Sufi women is a sense of the spiritual community of women, their daily interactions, their relationship with the master and the male community of followers, and their influence in the emerging Sufi discourses. Contrary to Rkia E. Cornell's views in her introduction to Sulami's *Early Sufi Women*, there is no evidence pointing to "a center of women's spirituality" in the city of Nasa north of Nishapur. Unfortunately, Cornell's reading of *Asrar* is based on a mistranslation. In the passage recording Abu Sa'id's visit to the city of Nasa, Ibn al-Munavvar, the author of *Asrar*, talks about Nasa as a special place and a venerable land where four hundred Sufi masters are buried. He then goes on to say that at the time when Sufis are hard to find, the presence of Sufi saints is still felt in the city of Nasa. Near the end of the passage, Ibn al-Munavvar talks about the Sufi saints and *awliya* (friends of God) of Nasa as "dear veiled ones." Cornell mistakenly translates the phrase as "women" and thereby misinterprets the whole passage.[81]

However, I do not think that we need to find a center for women's spirituality in Nasa or elsewhere to somehow prove that women participated in Sufi practices, had memberships in Sufi orders, and occasionally enjoyed leadership positions in the Sufi community. If we look carefully at women's presence in the founding texts of Sufism and the gender construction of the Sufi discourses from the third/nnth century to the present, we find enough traces of women and their role in shaping the discourse and practice of Sufism to reorient our approach to Sufism as a gendered construction in need of rethinking and reimagining. For example, just by examining Hujwiri's survey and Abu Sa'id's hagiographies, we come upon stories, events, and questions that still play a part in our understanding and practice of Sufism as women and men. Considering the story of Bayazid and Fatima Khezruya and the fact that Sufi guides or spiritual masters have most often been male, how can we talk about master/disciple space as a safe space for women without necessarily falling into

the trap of the fundamentalists (or misogynists like Hujwiri) who use this occasion as a justification for the exclusion of women? Rethinking women on the rooftop of Sufi lodges and the construction of *sama'* as a gendered performance, how can we restore the practice of *sama'* to a gender-neutral ritual of prayer open to women as well as men? If we have not been able to appropriately explore and address these questions and many others, it is because we have not yet seriously considered the effects of the gendering of the Sufi discourses in the Sufi communities and on Sufi women past and present.

But before considering these questions, we must first examine the construction of Sufi woman as an exceptional being for it is through this construction that the Sufi discourses have been able to censor and/or minimize the presence of women in the Sufi histories and biographical works. My next chapter therefore offers a critical reading of Rabi'a al-Adawiyya's construction as an exceptional Sufi woman in the discourse of Sufism.

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[1] Rita Gross, *Feminism and Religion* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 73.
[2] Rkia Elaroui Cornell, introduction to *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr an-Niswa al-Muta'abbidat as-Sufiyyat*, by Abu' Abd ar-Rahman as-Al-Sulami, trans. Rkia E. Cornell (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1999), 44.
[3] While Sufism is generally associated with the Iraq school of Junayd and his followers, the mystical path of *Malamatiyya* and the practice of *futuwwa* were developed independently and in parallel to Iraqi Sufism in the region of Khurasan, in particular, in Nishapur. Like Sufis, Malamatis were interested in the transformation of animal ego (lower *nafs*) to achieve selfless devotion to God. Their method was to subject the ego (*nafs*) to constant blame, *malama*, through self-censure. The ethical code of chivalry (*futuwwa* in Arabic, *javanmardi* in Persian) was practiced by artisan professional circles as altruism and self-sacrifice for others. Most scholars of early Sufism such as Ahmet Karamustafa argue for the close ties between Malamatis and people of *futuwwa*. See Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 65-66. Karamustafa also comments on Al-Sulami's deliberate effort to bring together various mystical schools like Malamatis and Sufis to create a unified history of Sufism. See Ibid., 63.
[4] Following the earlier example of the *tabaqat* genre, Sufi *tabaqat* literature provided information on prominent figures, often in chronological order. For an overview of the *tabaqat* genre, see Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), 93-95; and R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 187-208.
[5] Cornell, introduction to *Early Sufi Women* 60.
[6] Ibid., 61.

[7] Abu Nasr ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Ali al-Sarraj, *Kitab al-luma fi’l-tasawwuf* (The Book of Light Flashes on Sufism) and Abu’l-Qasim al-Qushayri, *Risala* (Treatise).
[8] Aside from the fact that I had seen darvishes read and discuss *Kashf al-mahjub* and *Asrar al-tawhid* while I was growing up in the Tehran *khaniqah*, the two books were referenced heavily in Nimatullahi publications. Both books are still in print in Iran. *Kashf al-mahjub* enjoys more prominence among Sufis in Pakistan while *Asrar al-tawhid* is to this day one of the first books read by Sufi novices in Iran. For Hujwiri’s place in contemporary Sufism in Pakistan see Shaykh Mufti Wajid Iqbal’s discourse on Data Ganj Bakhsh Ali al-Hujwiri published on May 27, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMwvf_B2pO8
[9] In *Kashf al-mahjub* he writes: “My Shaykh had further traditions concerning him, but I could not possibly set down more than this, my books having been left at Ghazna—may God guard it!—while I myself had become a captive among uncongenial folk (*dar miyan-i najinsan*) in India. God be praised both in joy and sorrow!” *Kashf al-mahjub*, Persian edition, 110, Nicholson, 91. Ali ibn Uthman Hujwiri, *Kashf al-mahjub,* ed. Valentine Zhukovsky (Tehran: Kitabkhana-i Tahuri, 1378/1999). Al Hujwiri, Ali B. Uthman Al-Jullabi. *Kashf Al-Mahjub of Al Hujwiri: The Oldest Treatise on Sufism*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson, new ed. vol. 17. (London: “E.J.W. Gibb Memorial” Series, 1976). Print. “E.J.W. Gibb Memorial” Ser. Here and elsewhere the Persian text of *Kashf al-mahjub* is identified as *Kashf al-mahjub*, Persian edition and the English translation is identified as *Kashf al-mahjub*, Nicholson’s translation. Also, here and elsewhere I cite Nicholson’s translation whenever I use it, with slight modifications.
[10] For an extended biography of Hujwiri see Carl Ernst’s foreword to Nicholson’s translation of *Kashf al-mahjub* in Shaykh Ali al-Hujwiri, *Revealing the Mystery* (*Kashf al-mahjub*), trans. R. A. Nicholson, reprint ed. (N.Y.: Pir Press, 1999).
[11] Many of the older generation of Nimatullahi Sufis in Iran are familiar with the book and have read all or parts of the book. The new generation of Nimatullahi Sufis in Iran know the book through the quotations in many of Javad Nurbakhsh’s books on Sufism.
[12] Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, 83.
[13] Hujwiri, *Kashf al-mahjub*, Persian edition, 292 and 296.
[14] Ibid., 296, (emphasis added).
[15] Ibid., 85 and 477.
[16] Ibid., 14.
[17] Ibid., 391.
[18] Ibid., 472-473.
[19] Ibid., 467.
[20] Hujwiri, *Kashf al-mahjub*, Persian edition, 127. Hujwiri, Nicholson trans. 102. Here Nicolson’s translation is modified to better reflect the Persian text.
[21] Abu’Abd ar-Rahman as-Al-Sulami, *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr an-Niswa al-Muta’abbidat as-Sufiyyat*, trans. Rkia E. Cornell (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1999), 144, (emphasis added).
[22] Rkia Elaroui Cornell, introduction to *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr an-Niswa al-Muta’abbidat as-Sufiyyat*, by Abu’ Abd ar-Rahman as-Al-Sulami, trans. Rkia E. Cornell (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1999), 15.
[23] Hujwiri, *Kashf al-mahjub*, Persian edition, 98, 141, 439, 523.
[24] Ibid., 149.
[25] Al-Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, 168.
[26] Qushayri, 358.
[27] Hujwiri, *Kashf al-mahjub*, Persian edition, 149-150.
[28] Ibid., 150.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., 118, 155.
[31] Ibid., 60, 169, 173, 318, 319.
[32] See Sarraj, 236; and Qushayri 61, 38, and 748.
[33] Hujwiri, *Kashf al-mahjub*, Persian edition, 471.
[34] Ibrahim Khawas was a third/ninth century Sufi believed to be a companion in the Junayd circle in Baghdad.
[35] Hujwiri, *Kashf al-mahjub*, Persian edition, 474-475.
[36] Ibid., 475-476. The equation of woman with *fitna* in this passage is based on the *hadith* “The Prophet said: I do not leave after me any cause of trouble more fatal to man than women.” See Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 3, 243.
[37] In the Qur’an, Adam’s wife (not mentioned by name) is not the focus of the transgression and receives a completely different treatment than in the Bible. Yet, by the time al-Tabari (d. 923) wrote his great *hadith*-based Qur’an commentary, the woman was reconstructed through the most damnable biblical and *hadith* materials. For further reading

please see Barbara Freyer Stowasser, "The Chapter of Eve," in *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (N.Y. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 25-38. The Cain and Abel story is similarly changed through exegetic literature. The story of Cain killing his brother Abel over a woman (their sister) is also mentioned by al-Tabari as a possible version. See al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-muluk* History of Prophets and Kings, vol. 1, 308.

[38] Hujwiri, *Kashf al-mahjub*, Persian edition, 476. Hujwiri, Nicholson trans. 364.

[39] Shafi'i-Kadkani, *Cheshidan-i ta'm-i vaqt: az miras-i irfani-i Abu Sa'id-i Abu'l-Khayr* (Tehran: Intisharat-i Sukhan, 1385/2006), 86.

[40] Muhammad ibn Munavvar, *The \Secrets of God's Mystical Oneness or the Spiritual Stations of Shaikh Abu Sa'id,* trans. John Mohammad (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1992). Here and elsewhere I use my translation unless I cite the English translation.

[41] In the Nimatullahi Order in Iran, *Asrar* is still one of the first books recommended to Sufi novices.

[42] Jamal ad-Din Abu Rawh Lutf Allah, *Halat va sukhanan-i Shaykh Abu Sa'id-i Abu'l-Khayr* (Tehran: Intisharat-i Sukhan, 1384/2005).

[43] See note 39.

[44] *Asrar al-tawhid* has long been recognized as one of the gems of prose writing in classical Persian, alongside *Tarikh-e Beyhaqi* and *Tazkirat al-awliya.*

[45]Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, 100.

[46] Ibid.,

[47] Mohammad Reza Shafi'i-Kadkani, Introduction to Muhammad ibn Munavvar, *Asrar al-tawhid fi maqamat Shaykh Abi Sa'id*, ed. Mohammad Reza Shafi'i-Kadkani (Tehran: Mu'assasa-i Intisharat-i Agah, 1366/1987), vol. 1, 24.

[48] For an explanation of Qushayri and Ansari's opposition to Abu Sa'id see Shafi'i-Kadkani, introduction to *Asrar al-tawhid*, vol. 1, 40-41.

[49] Hagiographies of Abu Sa'id

[50] *Cheshidan-i ta'm-i vaqt*; 214 *Halat va sukhanan-i*; 131 *Asrar al-tawhid*, 339.

[51] *Asrar al-tawhid*, 205. (Emphasis added)

[52] Ibid., 306.

[53] Jamal ad-Din Abu Rawh Lutf Allah, *Halat va sukhanan-i Shaykh Abu Sa'id-i Abu-l-Khayr* (Tehran: Intisharat-i Sukhan, 1384/2005), Shafi'i-Kadkani, introduction to *Asrar al-tawhid*, vol. 1, 24, and *Cheshidan-i ta'm-i vaqt*.

[54] *Cheshidan-i ta'm-i vaqt*, 135,143. *Asrar al-tawhid*, 34, 74.

[55] *Cheshidan-i ta'm-i vaqt*, 135. *Asrar al-tawhid*, 34.

[56] *Cheshidan-i ta'm-i vaqt*, 143. *Asrar al-tawhid*, 74.

[57] Hujwiri, *Kashf al-mahjub*, Persian edition, 546.

[58] *Asrar al-tawhid*, 80.

[59] Ibid., 184.

[60] *Cheshidan-i ta'm-i vaqt*, 175.

[61] In 1925, the Turkish government officially banned all Sufi sects under Article 1 of Law 677 of the Constitution. Later, in 1943, the public performance of *sama'* was organized as an effort to reconfigure *sama*' as a cultural heritage. Today, public performances of *sama*', known in the West as "Whirling Dervishes," are not only part of the tourist attractions of Konya and other cities in Turkey, but also performances annually offered in international venues for Western audiences. For further reading see "Recent Representations of the Music of the Mevlevi Order of Sufism," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Music Studies*, Fall 2012, vol. 6, no. 2, 137-150.

[62] *Asrar al-tawhid*, 226, English trans. 342.

[63] *Asrar al-tawhid*, 80.

[64] Fritz Meire, *Abu Sa'id-i Abu l-Hayr: Wirklichkeit und Legende*, trans. Mehr Afaq Bayburdi (Tehran: Makaze Nashre Daneshgahi, 1378/1999), 409.

[65] Ibid.

[66] *Asrar al-tawhid*, 73, English trans. 153.

[67] See S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (Albany: State University of New York Press: 2006), 165-183.

[68] *Halat va sukhanan*, 97.

[69] *Asrar al-tawhid*, 74, English trans. 154.

[70] *Asrar al-tawhid*, 277-278.

[71] Here Sayena is depicted as a *rend*. "In Sufi terminology, the *rend* is one who is liberated from the bonds of etiquette and the conventions of society.…The *rend* is a repudiater who repudiates out of intelligence, not out of stupidity or

ignorance, his actions being based on heart-discernment." Javad Nurbakhsh, *Sufi Symbolism*, vol. 6 (New York: KNP Publications, 1992), 119-120.
[72] *Asrar al-tawhid*, 278.
[73] Ibid., 257.
[74]Ibid., 259.
[75] Ibid., 263, 312.
[76] Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*.
[77] Ibid., 108.
[78] *Cheshidan-i ta'm-i vaqt*, 187.
[79] *Asrar al-tawhid*, 187-188.
[80] Javad Nurbakhsh, *Sufi Symbolism*, vol. 10 (N.Y.: KNP 1996), 124.
[81] Cornell's translation: "In this city [Nasa] there are a number of women of high spirituality who are veiled from others and of whom one finds no example in other lands. Just like the majority of men of God, they follow the [divine] tradition: "They are beneath the veil of My coat; no one other than Me can recognize them." Although they are far from the regard of men, the effects of their life of piety, their acts of grace, and their prayers are very numerous." (69)
My translation: "And there are many dear veiled ones in this city of whom one finds no example in other places. Although they are hidden from people's eyes under the veil of 'My Friends under My domes and no one knows them but Me,' the effects of their presence and their blessings are very numerous and clear." As evidenced in the passage, here veil has a spiritual significance. The Friends of God (awliya) are veiled by God, meaning "they are hidden from people's eyes," in order to be able to devote their time entirely to Him.

Chapter 3: Rabi'a al-Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya: Deconstructing the Exceptional Sufi Woman

For centuries, the name Rabi'a has been synonymous with Sufi women. Rabi'a al-Adawiyya (d. 185/810) remains the most quoted and cited Sufi woman in Sufi texts of various centuries. It is not only that Rabi'a is the most recognizable and popular Sufi woman saint in most parts of the world, but also that for most people Rabi'a remains the only name associated with Sufi women. A simple internet search would testify to this fact. As soon as you type "Sufi woman" in English or Persian, Rabi'a al-Adawiyya comes up as the only name in your search. Other entries pertaining to Sufism and women also cite Rabi'a al-Adawiyya as the first and foremost Sufi woman. Rabi'a is also the only Sufi woman who has many books devoted entirely (or mostly) to her. Here are some titles in the English language on Rabi'a: *Rabi'a The Mystic and her Fellow-Saints in Islam* by Margaret Smith, *Doorkeeper of the Heart: Versions of Rabi'a* by Charles Upton, *Abdel Rahman Badawi: Rabi'a Al-Adawiyya, Martyr of Divine Love* translated by Milena Rampoldi, *Rabi'a al-Adawiyya: Life and Poems* by Paul Smith, and *First Among Sufis: The Life and Thought of Rabia al-Adawiyya* by Widad El Sakkakini and Nabil Safwat.

How can one woman overshadow the entire history of women's participation in Sufi practice and discourse from the third/ninth century to the present time in such a way that would render all other women invisible? How was Rabi'a constructed by Sufi surveys and biographies of the saints and what does her construction mean to the gendering of the Sufi discourse?

Significantly, the woman who became the archetype of Sufi women was not known as a "Sufi" in her own time. Scholars agree that Sufism as a self-aware movement with identifiable concepts and rituals (discourse and practice) did not appear until well into the third/ninth century.

Rabi'a al-Adawiyya is therefore recognized as one of the major figures in the ascetic renunciation movement that predates the Sufism of Junayd (d. 298/910) in Baghdad and mysticism of Bayazid (d. 234/848 or 261/875) in Khurasan by fifty to one hundred years. To complicate matters further, as Ahmet Karamustafa observes, "renunciants (*zahid*) and pietists ('*abid, nasik*) of this period were not organized into a single homogeneous movement but came in different colours and stripes."[1] Some spent most of their time studying the Qur'an and *hadith*, others abandoned scholarship altogether. Some were social activists practicing *al-amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa nahy an al-munkar* (commanding right and forbidding wrong), others shunned society and became recluses. Only a first few renunciants of this period were included in the later genealogies of Sufism by Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d. 412/1021) and other scholars and biographers.

Exactly at what point the ascetic movement of the second/eighth century in Iraq takes an inward turn and who would best represent the link between early asceticism and the later Sufi practices are still unknown to the scholars of Sufism. Still, scholars seem to agree that the expression of "disinterested love" attributed to Rabi'a points to a "single-minded concentration on God" leading to an eventual path to mystical knowledge.[2]

However, in the earliest sources on Rabi'a there is no mention of her expressions of love. Rather, the emphasis is on her piety and asceticism (*zuhd*). On the other hand, Rabi'a love poems appear much later in the Sufi texts and have doubtful origins. Abu Talib al-Makki (d. 386/996) is the first writer attributing love poems to Rabi'a. Later, the renowned scholar Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) cites one of the poems with his own commentary as evidence of Rabi'a's advanced knowledge of love as a mystic.[3] Likewise, the great Andalusian Sufi Ibn Arabi says of Rabi'a that "she is the one who analyzes and classes the categories of love to the point of being the most famous interpreter of love."[4] In fact, as Carl Ernst observes, given that the poems and anecdotes concerning

Rabi'a are mostly related in later periods, "it is striking that the Sufi tradition unanimously credits Rabi'a with these insights into love and regards her as the example of the pure lover of God."[5]

To make matters more challenging and complicated, Rabi'a is not the only woman mystic talking about love in this period. Maryam of Basra, Mu'mina the Daughter of Bahlul, Afiyyat al-Mushtaqa, Sha'wana, Hayyuna, and Rayhana also talk about love. Their commentaries on love are recorded in the two surviving biographies of women ascetics and Sufi women, Sulami's *Early Sufi Women* (fourth/tenth century) and Jamal al-Din Abu al-Faraj ibn al-Jawzi's (d. 597/1201) *Sifat as-safwa* (sixth/twelfth century.) Moreover, none of the love poems attributed to Rabi'a are recorded in either of these biographies.

My aim in this chapter is not to prove that Rabi'a al-Adawiyya as a historical figure did not exist or that she was not a mystic; rather, I would like to draw a distinction between the historical Rabi'a and Rabi'a as a discursive construction although with the scarcity of the sources on Rabi'a, it would be very difficult to reach any definitive conclusions, looking at the available sources from al-Jahiz (d. 255/869) to Farid ad-Din Attar (d. 618/1221), it is possible to speculate on the construction of Rabi'a as a legend, especially in comparison to the other female renunciants before or after her. Aside from various attempts at clarifying the confusion of different women named Rabi'a in the discourse of Sufism, there have been no scholarly attempts to explain the confusing, at times erroneous, and even contradictory construction of Rabi'a al-Adawiyya in the discourse of Sufism.[6] To this day, Margaret Smith's well-known and comprehensive work on Rabi'a al-Adawiyya, which was first published in 1977, remains the only major source on the topic, in spite of its serious limitations as a critical study. Smith includes all that is written about Rabi'a from a little after her death to the seventeenth century, without weighing in on how and why different elements of these narratives are at odds with one another. Not having access to the recent scholarship on Sufi women,

especially the publication of *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr an-niswa al-muta'abbidat as-sufiyyat* by Sulami, Smith simply takes her sources at face value and tries to build a narrative around them.

Here I would like to argue that the construction of Rabi'a has followed a peculiar pattern unlike that of any other saint before or after her. Simply put, I believe that Rabi'a, who starts out in the histories as one of the ascetics of the early period, gradually and through centuries becomes a composite of images and anecdotes that not only belong to various women by the name of Rabi'a, namely Rabi'a al-Azdiyya and Rabi'a bint Isma'il (something already noticed by some other scholars), but also by other real or imaginary women or mystics of many centuries. How does this composite image emerge? Why does it emerge? And, what effect does it have on our understanding of gender in the Sufi discourses from medieval times to the present? These are some of the questions I will address in this chapter.

Section 1: Rabi'a the Ascetic

The early sources on Rabi'a do not discuss the circumstances of her life, her lineage, her age, her marital status, or even her spiritual quest. Rather in these early sources Rabi'a is introduced as an already recognized and respected pious woman whose company and advice are sought after by the contemporary religious leaders of her community. Al-Jahiz, a well-known writer from Basra (where Rabi'a is said to have lived most of her adult life), includes Rabi'a in his books *Kitab al-Bayan wa al-tabyin* (a book on rhetoric) and *Kitab al-hayawan* (The Book of Animals) among the pious and the ascetics of Basra (*nossak al-Basra wa zuhhadoha*).[7] The two anecdotes related by al-Jahiz (who is writing some fifty to sixty years after Rabi'a's death) exemplify her total dependence on God as

well as her fear that her pious deeds would not be accepted by God, both typical of the ascetics of her period.

> Upon being told, "If you were to speak to the men of your family, they would buy a servant for you, and he would save you the trouble of your housework," Rabi'a replied, "I should be ashamed to ask for this world from Him to Whom it belongs, so how should I ask for it from him to whom it does not?" And when she was asked "Have you ever performed any act that you think will be accepted [by God]? she responded by saying "if there was any such [act], I would still fear that it would be rejected!"[8]

These two reports do not give us enough insight into Rabi'a's brand of piety or asceticism. In fact, the reports rarely provide substantial details or information about the person or people involved. In order to draw the contours of any spiritual/religious figure mentioned in the hagiographies, biographies, or histories of the medieval Islamic period, one must place these reports alongside other reports of the same figure or similar figures in other sources. In other words, the question we need to ask is how does Rabi'a's brand of piety differ from that of other ascetics (male or female) of her period and how is it characterized or changed from the writings of al-Jahiz to Attar.

After al-Jahiz, the written reports on Rabi'a are scant and scattered. Except for the report on the famous love poem attributed to Rabi'a in *Qut al-qulub* (The Food of Hearts) by al-Makki (d. 386/996) and in *at-Ta'arruf li-madhhab ahl al-tasawwuf* (Introducing the Way of the People of Sufism) by Abu Bakr al- Kalabadhi (d. 380/990) there are no major reports on Rabi'a's ascetic life and practices.[9] The fuller portrait of Rabi'a finally emerges in the first biographical compilation of women ascetics and Sufis in Sulami's (d. 412/1021) *Early Sufi Women.* The next portrait of Rabi'a is drawn by al-Jawzi in *Sifat as-safwa* (Attributes of the Elite), a biographical compilation of male and female devotees. Finally, we encounter an elaborate and expansive biographical sketch of Rabi'a in

Attar's *Tazkirat al-awliya* as the only woman who has received the privilege of being included alongside well-known and reputed Sufi men and masters of many generations. By comparing the reports of Sulami, al-Jawzi, and Attar with each other and with earlier reports on Rabi'a and on other ascetics (male and female) of her period, we can better understand the construction of Rabi'a as an exemplary Sufi woman.

In his recently published study of early Muslim renunciants, Christopher Melchert enumerates some of the shared characteristics found among the group: poverty, fasting or consuming little food, night-time devotion, withdrawal from society, wearing wool, devoting extraordinary amounts of time to Qur'anic recitation and ritual prayer, celibacy, avoiding licit gain (*kasb*), cultivating sadness and fear—especially sadness over past sins and fear of judgment to come, weeping, keeping one's attention mainly on God and the judgment to come, and showing indifference to good works in the world.[10] Although these characteristics define the general outline of the renunciation movement in the second century of the Islamic calendar, they do not necessarily define individual practice of piety. Except for the principle of "keeping one's attention mainly on God," individual renunciants vary to a certain degree in their adherence to the above set of prescriptions.

The sources on Rabi'a before Attar include some of the characteristics of the early renunciants Melchert mentions in his study, such as poverty, fasting, night-time devotion, withdrawal from society, celibacy, and keeping one's attention mainly on God. What sets Rabi'a apart from the other renunciants of the period, however, is that there is no report of her talking about sins or the Day of Judgment. In fact, in a much-quoted saying attributed to Rabi'a in al-Makki's *Qut al-qulub*, Rabi'a completely dissociates her devotion to God from interest in the hereafter. She says: "I have not served God from fear of Hell, for I should be like a wretched hireling, if I did it from

fear; nor from love of Paradise, for I should be a bad servant if I served for the sake of what was given, but I have served Him only for the love of Him and desire for Him."[11] Rabi'a's atypical approach to sin and judgment in the earlier sources is much later revised to reflect the mainstream piety of her age. In his book *al-Kawakib al-durriya* (The Pearly Stars), an Egyptian writer by the name of Abd al-Ra'uf al-Munawi (d. 1622 CE) evidently reports on Rabi'a's excessive fear of hellfire, which in turn persuades Margaret Smith to conclude that Rabi'a had experienced fear of hell and rejection at the initial stages of her piety.[12] But as we saw in the two reports by al-Jahiz, early on, Rabi'a's brand of piety is marked by her total reliance on God (*tavakkol*) and her refusal to value her own pious deeds as guarantee of her salvation. When she says, "If there was any such [act], I would still fear that it would be rejected!" she is not expressing a typical fear of behaving sinfully or going to hell. Rather she refuses a self-righteous approach to piety, believing in one's own deeds, or thinking that one is in any way deserving of God's grace and mercy.

Sulami's portrait of Rabi'a in *Early Sufi Women*, appearing some 150 years after al-Jahiz's, is the first attempt, according to the surviving sources, at giving Rabi'a a fuller, more rounded treatment by providing more reports of her sayings and exchanges with other people. As Rkia E. Cornell so astutely observes, by opening his book with Rabi'a rather than choosing a chronological approach like al-Jawzi, Sulami gives prominence to Rabi'a al-Adawiyya and affords her a special place in the history of female piety and spirituality.[13] It is also important to note that Sulami gives Rabi'a more pages than he gives other women who come (historically) before or after her. But who is Sulami's Rabi'a and what qualities does she possess? Out of eleven reports or sayings, four focus on the importance of sincerity (*sidq*) in Rabi'a's brand of piety. In two reports Rabi'a admonishes others for their lack of sincerity in expressing their devotion to God. In the other two she confesses her own lack in adequately expressing a kind of devotion deserving of God. Although other ascetics

of the period also talk about the importance of sincerity, in Sulami's Rabi'a we encounter an uncompromising approach to sincerity that only matches Rabi'a's relentless self-examination and her fierce concentration on God. Another characteristic of Rabi'a's piety, as defined by Sulami, is her lack of interest in following mainstream religious decorum. When asked "How is your love for the Prophet (may God bless and preserve him)?" Rabi'a replies: "Verily, I love him. But love for the Creator has turned me away from love for created things."[14] Such a response marks Rabi'a's expression of piety as a unique and daring challenge to the asceticism of her age. While many of her fellow renunciants spend a fair amount of their time recounting *hadith* and reciting the Qur'an, Sulami's Rabi'a can easily overlook the Prophet himself for the sake of her exclusive preoccupation with God. All in all, it is the intensity of Sulami's Rabi'a that stays with one, more than anything else, an intensity born not so much out of a burning intoxicating love (though there is at least one report describing her as "inebriated from love")[15] as one out of total submission and trust.

Al-Jawzi's Rabi'a in *Sifat as-safwa* on the other hand, appearing almost two hundred years after Sulami's account of Rabi'a and four hundred years after Rabi'a's death, no longer exhibits the exceptional qualities that make Sulami's Rabi'a stand out among her fellow renunciants (male or female). Rather, Rabi'a of *Sifat as-safwa* becomes a typical renunciant who behaves in predicable ways already outlined by the other renunciants of her time. She weeps frequently, creating puddles of water from her tears, she shrieks and faints upon hearing the mention of Hellfire, she deprives herself of sleep and engages in all-night devotion, and she frequently talks about death and the Day of Resurrection. However, other of Rabi'a's qualities described in many earlier reports by al-Jahiz and Sulami do make their way into al-Jawzi's account of Rabi'a, reports on her sincerity and admonishing others for their lack, her unwavering attention to God, her complete reliance on God, and her refusal to accept people's help. Nonetheless, these reports are already framed by an extreme

ascetic portrait of Rabi'a, making her devotion to God of less significance. In fact, what is completely missing in al-Jawzi's account of Rabi'a is her love. Al-Jawzi does not even allow Rabi'a the kind of trusting love (*muhabbat*) that Sulami develops and elaborates in his report. In the end, al-Jawzi's Rabi'a comes across as a weeping, trembling ascetic too fearful of death and the Day of Judgment to be of any value to the later mystics.

Section 2: Rabi'a the Lover of God and Other Women Mystics of Her Time

> I have loved Thee with two loves:
> a selfish love and a love of which You are worthy.
> That love which is a selfish love
> is my remembrance of You and nothing else.
> But as for the love of which You are worthy,
> Ah, then You've torn the veils for me so I see You.
> There is no praise for me in either love,
> but the praise is Yours in this love and in that.[16]

In her introduction to the English translation of Sulami's text, Rkia E. Cornell notes that Sulami does not emphasize love-mysticism as an important aspect of Rabi'a's teachings and practice. According to Cornell, Sulami's downplaying of Rabi'a's love, results in a "more masculine" and "more balanced" portrayal than the images of her in later biographies (especially that of *Sifat as-safwa* by al-Jawzi).[17] One way to interpret Cornell's assessment is to think of Sulami's portrait of Rabi'a as less "emotional" and "passionate" than some of the other women presented in Sulami's reports.

Sulami's Rabi'a does not swoon, weep excessively, or express herself in passionate poetry. But neither do Lubaba, Mu'mina the Daughter of Bahlul, Mu'adha bint Abdallah al-Adawiyya, and countless other women included in Sulami's reports. On the other hand, there are reports that both men and women practiced pious weeping and the Sufi discourses from the very beginning not only tolerated but valued the "emotional" and "passionate" expressions of piety in male subjects.[18] The emotional outbursts of the likes of male mystics such as Nuri and Shibli were not censored but celebrated in Sufi texts, and the passionate expression of love towards God gradually became the standard language of Sufism. To call Sulami's Rabi'a more "masculine" and "balanced" because she appears less passionate or emotional reproduces the gender dichotomy in a starker version than was actually experienced by the renunciants and the mystics.

On the other hand, unlike al-Jawzi who completely leaves out any mention of Rabi'a's expression of love towards God, Sulami's Rabi'a expresses her love for the Divine (using the Arabic word *hubb*) at least in four encounters and anecdotes: in one she excuses herself from loving the Prophet because of her total absorption in loving God; in another she admonishes a fellow renunciant (Rabah) for kissing a small boy and saying that he loves him, protesting that she did not imagine that there was room in his heart "to love anything other than God"; in yet another story in answer to how one can come close to God, she answers "he must not love anything in this world or the hereafter other than Him."[19] Yet none of these expressions of love is as powerful as the one in which Rabi'a is shown to be physically affected by love, staggering and off balance as if drunk. "Muhammad ibn Wasi came upon Rabi'a while she was staggering like one inebriated. 'What causes you to stagger?' he asked. 'Last night I became intoxicated with love for my Lord and woke up inebriated from it,' she replied."[20] This is as close as Sulami gets to describing Rabi'a's love not merely as a verbal expression of devotion but as a physical/psychological state of intoxication.

Curiously, however, there is no mention of Rabi'a's much quoted love poetry in Sulami's work.[21] The famous poem on love with which I began this section, attributed to Rabi'a and recorded with commentary in *Qut al-qulub* (The Food of Hearts) by al-Makki more than a hundred and fifty years after Rabi'a's death, is evidently shown to be originally a secular love poem.[22] Even if we accepted that the poem cited above was indeed by Rabi'a, we must agree that Rabi'a is not the only woman mystic talking about love in this period. So, the question remains why she was singled out among the mystic women expressing love as the one representing the group? In the two surviving biographies of women ascetics and Sufi women, Sulami's *Early Sufi Women* and al-Jawzi's *Sifat as-safwa* written two centuries later, Maryam of Basra, Mu'mina the Daughter of Bahlul, Afiyyat al-Mushtaqa, Sha'wana, Hayyuna, and Rayhana are also reported as contributors to the subject of love.

The case of Rayhana is especially significant. First, Rayhana's sayings are all in poetry and all about love. Second, unlike Rabi'a who is primarily known as an ascetic, Rayhana is introduced as "Rayhana the enraptured" (*valehe*) by Sulami or "Rayhana the possessed" (*majnuna*) by al-Jawzi. Al-Jawzi also describes her as "rationally insane" (*Uqhala' al-majanin*) of al-Ubulla. She is moreover included in the fourth/tenth century biography of *'Uqhala' al-majanin* (Wise madmen) by Abu al-Qasim al-Naysaburi as one of the nine women who were reported to be enraptured by Divine madness.[23] As far as we know, Rabi'a al-Adawiyya was never included in this category. So, it seems that at least for certain writers like al-Jawzi the expression of passionate love for God is only permissible as utterances of someone possessed by the love of God, someone who is not altogether sane or rational. Al-Jawzi's decision therefore to purge Rabi'a from any association with love discourse seems to be in accordance to his views on marking love as discourse of *'Uqhala' al-majanin* and separating it from mainstream ascetic practices.

Whatever Rayhana's inclusion in the category of *'Uqhala' al-majanin* might mean, her poetry on love clearly stands out both in volume and intensity among other women ascetics and mystics of the period. Sulami offers one of her poems in his biography of Sufi women:

You are my Intimate Companion, my Aspiration, and my Happiness,

And my heart refuses to love anything but You.

Oh, my Dear, my Aspiration, and Object of my desire,

My yearning is endless! When will I finally meet You?

My request is not for Heaven's Pleasures;

I desire only to encounter You![24]

Al-Jawzi includes more of Rayhana's poems in *Sifat as-safwa*:

The Lover drew near to one he longed for in such a way,

That his heart nearly flew from his body from sheer happiness.

Do not become intimate with the One whose sight you long for,

For you will be prevented from finding Him in the darkness.

Strive and persevere, and be in the night as one who sorrows,

And He will pour you a glass of love from His glory and generosity.

In intimacy and closeness to God the darkness dissipates,

If only His intimacy could bring back the darkness as well![25]

Comparing the much quoted and debated love poem attributed to Rabi'a to the numerous utterances of love by Rayhana, one is struck by the passion expressed in Rayhana's utterances compared to the more intellectual definition of the two kinds of love expressed in Rabi'a's poem. Although both poems belong to the early period of mystical love where Joseph Lumbard observes "there is always a duality between the human lover and the Divine Beloved," in Rabi'a's poem the duality of the lover and the Beloved reverberates even more in the duality of the two kinds of love existing side by side.[26] In Rayhana's poems, however, the emphasis is on the longing of the spiritual seeker and her restlessness in wanting to be with her Beloved. That is why the word *hubb* by itself does not capture the intensity of Rayhana's emotions and her relationship with the Beloved. She also uses *uns* (companionship) and *ulfa* (passionate love) in combination with the imagery of darkness (*zulma*) to show us how this relationship is entangled and involved, as if the lover and the Beloved are inseparable, even though they are separate.

Rayhana's love poems also express the idea of a "disinterested love" more directly and simpler than the poem attributed to Rabi'a. Whereas in Rabi'a's poem one needs to interpret the speaker's idea of selfish love versus a love worthy of the Beloved, in Rayhana's poem the speaker simply says that she is not interested in "Heaven's Pleasures," but desires only the Beloved:

My request is not for Heaven's Pleasures;

I desire only to encounter You!

Once again, given the directness, intimacy, and volume of Rayhana's poems, it is puzzling that Rabi'a, in spite of scant evidence, is chosen as the champion of "disinterested love" and a major link between early asceticism and later love mysticism.[27] One possible explanation is that Rabi'a, who is championed early on for her ascetic practices, is gradually turned towards love discourse to accommodate the expression of mystical love by women mystics.

On the other hand, the fact that these early mystical love poems are almost exclusively either expressed or else associated with women mystics raises questions about gender and the expression of mystical love in early movements of piety. Maria M. Dakake addresses the gendered inflection and the language of "domesticity" in the expression of love by pious and/or Sufi women from the seventh to the thirteenth century.[28] Responding to Dakake's overarching thesis that women's "descriptions of their spiritual relationship with the Beloved tend to be less exotic and more 'domesticated' than those we find commonly attributed to Sufi men,"[29] Laury Silvers argues that "any definition of 'domesticity' should be open to the range of experience of a life" in relation to the patriarchal social norms, and therefore cannot be always defined as a positive experience.[30] However, neither Dakake nor Silvers explores the almost exclusive association of the emergence of mystical love discourse with the poetry attributed to the early women ascetics and/or mystics of the second/eight century especially Rabi'a al-Adawiyya. Although according to Sulami's reports both male preachers and female ascetics lectured on the subject of love (*mahabba*),[31] it seems that the transmission of the discourse of love, especially as it relates to the concept of "disinterested love," and intimacy with the Divine Beloved takes place through the love poems associated with women ascetic/mystics, or as in the writings of al-Makki to Attar, the single poem loosely associated with Rabi'a al-Adawiyya as a way of interpreting and representing love mysticism. Whether early women ascetics and mystics were somehow more inclined to express their love for the Divine Beloved in the language of poetry than their male counterparts, or that for the early ascetics the Divine Beloved was strongly identified as a masculine presence and therefore more appropriately addressed in love poems composed by women, in the reports of the early ascetics and mystics of the second/eighth century, women are predominantly transmitters of the doctrine of love to the later generations of

mystics who by the time of Abu Hamid Ghazali and Ibn Arabi were able to develop their own complex theories of love mysticism.

Section 3: Attar's Rabi'a, The Sufi Saint

Although there are only thirty years separating al-Jawzi from Attar, these two more or less contemporary biographers of Rabi'a are at the opposing ends of a spectrum. Al-Jawzi, a legal scholar of the Hanbali school of jurisprudence, fashions Rabi'a in the likes of the other early renunciants as a religious devotee, aligning her with mainstream religious teachings (i.e. fear of judgment and hellfire). On the other hand, Attar, a pharmacist who becomes one of the greatest Sufi poets of the Persian language, already steeped in the rich tradition of Sufism in Khurasan, turns Rabi'a into a Sufi woman exemplar, worthy of appearing alongside giants of Sufism like Hallaj, Bayazid, and Junayd in his classic biography *Tazkirat al-awliya* (Memorial of God's Friends).[32]

Attar's Rabi'a not only exhibits the kind of longing and devotion attributed to saints and mystics, but she is also more fully developed as a character, with a life story chronicling her physical/temporal as well as her spiritual/atemporal journey. To what extent Attar has added to and expanded the already existing sources on Rabi'a is a scholarly mystery. In his introduction to *Tazkirat al-awliya,* Attar names three sources, not necessarily as sources that inform his biographical compilation, but as sources with extensive commentaries on the biographical entries in his *Tazkirat*. He says, "If a seeker is seeking a full commentary on the sayings of this folk, tell him to study these books: *Sharh al-qalb* (Commentary of the Heart), *Kashf al-asrar* (Unveiling of the Secrets), and *Ma'refat al-nafs* (Knowledge of the Self)."[33] Not only are these sources unavailable to us today, scholars believe that at least two of them were written by Attar himself.[34] Attar also emphasizes his

role as a collector (collecting data from many sources) and downplays his creative input, insisting that he has added very little commentary, only a few remarks made "to ward off the imagination of the outsiders and the uninitiated."[35]

Whatever Attar might have thought of his role as the writer of *Tazkirat al-awliya* (probably in accordance with the understanding of authorship in his age) there is a consensus in recent Sufi scholarship that Attar's role in *Tazkirat* goes well beyond mere collection of biographical data and sayings of the *awliya* (Friends of God). Paul Losensky, who has translated a selection of Attar's *Tazkirat* for English readers, examines Attar's various techniques of rewriting. In "The Creative Compiler: The Art of Rewriting in Attar's *Tazkirat al-awliya*," focusing on Attar's entry on Ali-yi Sahl-i Isfahani (d. 280/893), Losensky demonstrates the extent of Attar's literary genius in rewriting the material he has found in sources like Hujwiri's *Kashf al-mahjub*, Qushayri's *Risala*, and Sulami's *Tabaqat al-sufiyya* in a unified, cohesive, and stylistically superior form.[36] In most aspects of a biography entry Attar stays close to his sources, sometimes repeating them verbatim, sometimes offering a poetic version, often framing the entry in poetic prose and emphasizing/summarizing the traits and themes associated with the person. However, there is at least one instance where Attar combines two events belonging to two separate individuals (Ali-yi Sahl-i Isfahani and Abu Ya'qub-i Nahrajuri) and seamlessly presents them as one event relating to Ali-yi Sahl-i Isfahani.[37] This instance clearly shows that Attar is not committed to historical accuracy. Ultimately, as Losensky also demonstrates in his introduction to the translation of *Tazkirat,* Attar's aim in manipulating and refashioning his sources through the complex art of rewriting—"imitation, quotation, paraphrase, literal and free translation, rearrangement, and even selective omission,"[38] at times leading to inaccurate presentation of his sources—is not to recount a historical past, but rather to create "an act

of sacred remembrance and devotion that intends to enable its readers to transcend the limitations of the self and reconnect with ultimate values and realities."[39]

Looking at Rabi'a's entry in *Tazkirat* through Losensky's lens of "creative compiler," one can speculate on Attar's methods and aims in rewriting Rabi'a. I emphasize speculation here because unlike other entries in *Tazkirat,* which point to myriad sources like Hujwiri's *Kashf al-mahjub*, Qushayri's *Risala*, and Sulami's *Tabaqat al-sufiyya* (and many more) and recount the same or similar anecdotes and sayings with some variations, Attar's Rabi'a is in many ways a complete departure from all the known and available sources on Rabi'a. As in all other entries in *Tazkirat*, Attar starts Rabi'a's entry with an introduction. But unlike other introductions in *Tazkirat*, which focus on individual traits and themes encapsulating the specific saint under discussion, the introduction on Rabi'a focuses on the question of gender. Apparently, Attar's choice to give Rabi'a a separate, long entry as the only woman among seventy-one Sufi masters included in *Tazkirat* warranted a justification. In answer to the question of "why we placed her memorial among the ranks of men (*saff-i rijal*)," Attar provides religious and mystical precedents. He cites A'isha (a wife of the Prophet Muhammad) as an important *hadith* transmitter who is at times called "the author of two-thirds of the faith" and refers to Maryam (mother of Jesus) as "the first among the ranks of men" when men are called at the day of resurrection.[40] He also appeals to the mystical concept of unity and asks: "In unity, what remains of I and you? Much less man and woman!"[41] At the same time, Attar also offers the most damning and controversial justification for the inclusion of Rabi'a: "Since a woman is a man on the path of God, she cannot be called a woman."[42] Of course it can be argued that Attar is appeasing his contemporary medieval audience (mostly men) who at best believe that women are inferior to men and at worst harbor feelings of extreme misogyny.[43] Notwithstanding Attar's motives in casting Rabi'a as a man among men, what ensues from Attar's inclusion of Rabi'a

as the only woman *wali* (friend of God) worthy of a separate entry, and his introduction on her, is a complex, contradictory narrative that at once affirms a woman's presence in the mystical tradition of *awliya* (friends of God) and denies entry to all women. Caught between the choice of writing a separate secondary biography of women (like Sulami's *Early Sufi Women*) or including women as footnotes in the stories of men (as he does for Fatema Balkhi as the wife of Ahmad ibn Khezruya, and Fatemeh Nishapuri as one of the teachers of Dhu'l-Nun), Attar decides to present Rabi'a al-Adawiyya as the exceptional woman mystic par excellence worthy of men's praise and approval and competing in stature with men like Junayd and Bayazid. As a result, Attar's Rabi'a would ensure woman's inclusion in the male dominant discourse and tradition while at the same time she would loom so large as a legendary woman (and as the only woman with a separate entry in *Tazkirat*) to make all other women invisible.

Rabi'a's introduction is a departure from all the other entries in the *Tazkirat*. In most biographies, Attar relates a story or anecdote leading to "repentance" or a change in a person's orientation, culminating in a spiritual quest. Attar starts the biography of Rabi'a with the story of her birth. As in most mythical births, Rabi'a's birth is marked by a sign, in this case a dream.

> It is related that on the night she was born, there was no lamp in her father's house, not a drop of oil to anoint her navel, nor much as a piece of cloth to swaddle her in. Her father had three daughters, and Rabi'a was the fourth. And so they called her Rabi'a, meaning "the fourth one." So, his wife said to him, "Go to neighbour so-and-so and ask for a lamp's worth of oil." Rabi'a's father had sworn not to ask any creature for anything. He got up, went to the neighbor's door, and returned, saying, "They were asleep."
>
> He fell asleep grieving. He saw the Prophet—peace and blessing upon him—in a dream. He said, "Don't be sad. The daughter is a noble lady who will intercede before Him

for seventy thousand of my community." He went on to say, "Go to Isa Radan, the emir of Basra, and say, 'This last Friday, you forgot how you call upon my blessings a hundred times each night and four hundred times on Friday. In atonement, give me four hundred gold dinars.'"[44]

Significantly, none of the other entries in *Tazkirat* start with such an elaborate story of birth. Only two other entries in the book have anecdotes relating to birth, one on Sufyan ath-Thawri (d. 161/777) and the other on Bayazid Bastami. They both relate similar stories about how each person was aware of the food his mother was consuming while he was in the womb (physically reacting to food that was unlawfully obtained).[45] The emphasis on the stories of Sufyan and Bayazid is on their "inborn" qualities. However, in Rabi'a's case, it is not only that Rabi'a's faith as a friend of God is already sealed at birth, but that the Prophet himself endorses her in a dream and provides for her and her family.

The beginning of Rabi'a's biography in Attar's *Tazkirat* also has a distinct characteristic of a modern narrative structure based on sequential events. It starts with the story of her birth and goes on to briefly describe her family (that her family is poor and she is the fourth child after three daughters), circumstances leading to her servitude (that she lost her parents and a great famine separated the sisters and she fell into the hands of an oppressor), her hardship in slavery (hard work followed by an episode where, escaping from a stranger, she falls and breaks her arm), her eventual release from slavery (after her master witnesses one of her nightly vigils in prayer and sees a light suspended over her head illuminating the house), and her subsequent dedication to a life of asceticism. Although Attar's style of writing is more inclined towards a narrative format than the customary style of reporting as exemplified by Sulami and others, none of the other entries in *Tazkirat* have the kind of fluid narrative form encapsulating various stages of life that Rabi'a's entry

has. As a result, the narrative style of Rabi'a's early life from birth until the end of her first pilgrimage makes her (and the circumstances of her life) both more tangible and more memorable to the readers of *Tazkirat.*

However, what makes Attar's biography of Rabi'a arguably more appealing and fascinating is its uniqueness among the early sources on Rabi'a; there are no other sources before Attar that talk about Rabi'a's early life. The most we can gather from earlier sources like Sulami's is that Rabi'a was a *mawlat* of the clan of Al Atak. A *mawla* (fem. *mawlat*) is a term used in the first and second century of the Arab/Islamic conquest referring either to freed slaves or non-Muslims/non-Arabs who were sponsored by an Arab clan and converted to Islam. In none of the sources before Attar where reports and anecdotes of Rabi'a appear, do we have an account of Rabi'a's early life. One does not know if Attar simply made up the narrative of Rabi'a's early life, modeled it after similar stories he had heard of other people, or based it on an oral legend of Rabi'a that might have existed in folklore. Whatever the case, we have no evidence to show that the stories about Rabi'a's early life were ever recorded in texts of various periods before Attar.

Nevertheless, Attar at least gives an impression that he is consulting more than one source in retelling parts of Rabi'a's story. He gives us two versions of her story after she was freed from slavery. In the first version, Rabi'a immerses herself in devotion, performing one thousand *rak'as* of prayer a day, and attending Hasan al-Basri's (d. 110/728) gatherings. In the second version, she falls into being a musical entertainer (*dar motrebi oftad*), repents (according to some manuscripts at the hands of Hasan al-Basri), and retires to a meditation cell.

The existence of the second version, according to Julian Baldick, suggests that at least part of Rabi'a's legend "is modeled on those of early Christian penitent courtesans."[46] Baldick goes on to argue that both as a former slave and as a musical entertainer, Rabi'a's position would have entailed

providing sexual services. He further notes that singing slave girls in early Islamic Iraq were often used in hagiographies as "mouthpieces for poems of love" or as witty women delivering crushing rebukes to male masters (their owners or spiritual guides). Rabi'a's witty rebukes to spiritual teachers like Sufyan ath-Thawri, Hasan al-Basri, and Ibrahim Adham and others, although embellished further by Attar, constitute a persistent trait of her earliest reports and biographies. Baldick also refers to Shams ad-Din Aflaki's biography of Rumi (written more than one hundred years after Attar) that makes a direct connection between prostitution and Rabi'a. Regardless of whether Aflaki's hagiography of Rumi is historically accurate or not, the anecdote shows that the construction of Rabi'a as a courtesan or a slave/prostitute who had repented was in circulation in Aflaki's time.[47]

Although Attar does not elaborate on Rabi'a's past, his veiled reference to her as a former slave and/or a penitent courtesan raises questions about real versus imaginary possibilities for women interested in pursuing spiritual paths. According to Sulami's account of early pious and/or Sufi women, ascetic and spiritual devotion was a viable choice for many women before, during, and after Rabi'a's time. Most of these women were not slaves or former slaves though they considered themselves servants of God (singular 'Abd Allah and 'Abidat Allah), and as Rkia E. Cornell noted, the trope of servitude played a significant part in their discourse.[48] While often their marital status was not even mentioned by Sulami, according to the later sources such as al-Jawzi's *Sifat as-safwa,* some were married, others were not. Some had another woman like Mu'adha bint Abdallah al-Adawiyya as their teacher. Others like Rabi'a bint Isma'il received guidance from male masters. Some like Umm 'Ali and Rabi'a bint Isma'il were rich, others lived in poverty. Some like Rayhana or Affiyya were enraptured and crazed by the love of God, others like Fakhrawayh bint Ali and Fatimah of Nishapur were known for their wit and spiritual knowledge. Against this rich and diverse

field of women's spiritual participation, Attar's melodramatic narrative of Rabi'a as an orphaned child forced into slavery and/or sexual service and becoming at one point a musical entertainer/courtesan until she is finally delivered or repented, makes one wonder why Attar chose to embellish the early obscure references of Rabi'a as a *mawlat* of the clan of Al Atak and thus to emphasize her servitude and bondage and her possible past as a loose, immoral woman who eventually repented. Even if Attar's biography of Rabi'a is based on an oral tradition of her life, it was still Attar's decision to incorporate what he deemed necessary (from the point of writing a sacred biography) and to disregard the rest, especially since none of the classical sources of Sufism before Attar had made any references to Rabi'a's early life. As tempting as it is to think of Attar's detailed recording of Rabi'a's early life as a narrative device serving the story of Rabi'a, knowing Attar's meticulous and diligent choice of presenting Rabi'a as the only woman with a separate entry means that everything about Attar's Rabi'a is carefully constructed to create a lasting representation of woman's spirituality.

By highlighting Rabi'a's slave narrative, Attar defines an exceptional woman *wali* (friend of God) as a woman in bondage who has no choice but to resign to her suffering and has no agency save her faith in God. One cannot ignore the implication here that Rabi'a's physical servitude to numerous male oppressors and masters prepares her for the final submission, surrender, and spiritual servitude to God. However, there is also an element of awe and wonder in a story of a slave girl (the most powerless and disenfranchised member of her society) turning into a *wali*/saint capable of performing miracles, rebuking reputable male teachers, and even addressing God almighty directly and in an intimate and, at times, demanding way. The appeal of Rabi'a's story is in the fantasy of transforming total disenfranchisement to complete empowerment, which is also so removed from the experiences and struggles of real women of diverse backgrounds in spiritual pursuit. This sense of

hyperbole and exaggeration in Rabi'a's story, while part of the style of Attar's *Tazkirat*, constructs the only woman *wali* as a fantastic, yet unattainable role model in the midst of many male figures who in their sheer diversity provide more chances for tangible and relatable encounters.

After highlighting Rabi'a's past and securing her eventual freedom from slavery, Attar devotes the rest of the entry (meaning the longest portion of the narrative) drawing Rabi'a's spiritual portrait as a *wali*. Here Attar incorporates many of the anecdotes from the earlier sources focusing on her *sidq* (sincerity), *tawakkul* (trust-in-God), *faqr* (spiritual poverty), and her love for God. As Paul Losensky demonstrates in relation to other entries in *Tazkirat*, here also while translating from Arabic, Attar rarely relates the anecdote in its original form, always changing the story in many ways, adding, deleting, and embellishing as he sees fit. He also makes a deliberate decision on expanding on the earlier portrait of Rabi'a as a woman *wali* rebuking well-known spiritual masters, which I will address under a separate section below.

However, the most important aspect of Attar's spiritual portrait of Rabi'a, not found in any earlier source, is his rendition of Rabi'a's private conversations with God. In the introduction to the English translation of this entry, Michael Sells raises the question of reporting in these conversations. "If she is alone… how does the narrator come to know of the conversation? If her telling of the conversation to someone else is implicitly assumed, it seems to be in tension with the emphasis on the confidentiality of her relationship with the divine."[49] I think we can ask this question only if we take Attar's reporting at face value as "reporting." By dropping the customary way of reporting through citing the chain of transmission for a report (similar to *hadith* reporting), Attar makes a great stylistic and interpretive move in the writing of his *Tazkirat* to forgo the usual yardstick of authenticity and instead engage his readers with a sacred narrative that in his own words "inscribes the love of God in the hearts of men."[50] But, by questioning the source of reporting in

these cases (as in many more cases throughout the *Tazkirat*), Michael Sells is also indirectly pointing to the fantastic (incredible, unbelievable, unlikely) quality of Attar's narrative. In a sense, the question is not whether we can authenticate the report, but rather what are our terms of the engagement with the fantastic construction of Rabi'a. As modern readers trained in critical analysis we read Rabi'a's conversations with God as part of her construction as a legend of the exemplary woman *wali*. But, as I have been arguing in this paper, the fantastic construction of Rabi'a also effects the overall construction of gender in Sufi discourses for centuries to come.

Unlike the miraculous deeds of a *wali,* which are found in almost every entry of the *Tazkirat,* conversations with God are not a typical occurrence in Attar's *Tazkirat*. Of the seventy-two entries only two have elaborate and compelling exchanges (mediated or unmediated) between a *wali* and God: first Rabi'a's entry and then Bayazid Bastami's biography that appears a little later in the text. If we compare the exchanges between Rabi'a and God with Bayazid's Divine conversations, we see that the God addressing Rabi'a is much harsher, threatening, and violent than the God addressing Bayazid. In her article "Hierarchical Inversions, Divine Subversions: The Miracles of Rabi'a al-Adawiya," Heidi A. Ford argues that while the aim in constructing these stories was "to identify Rabi'a directly with God," it was done so through a chastising God simply because "it may have been deemed too irreverent to presume to bestow God's favor upon a woman in a direct manner."[51] To be sure, by creating a more domineering and threatening God, the stories appeal to the gender sensitivity of the age that needs to see a woman (even a woman *wali*) in a vanquished state. However, I also think a deeper look at the narrative of Rabi'a's conversations with God reveals more complexities to the gender dynamics of the construction.

Attar provides three occasions for direct exchanges between Rabi'a and God. The first two occasions are part of the narrative of Rabi'a's pilgrimage to Mecca. In the first instance the exchange

starts with Rabi'a doubting the purpose of the pilgrimage. "My God, I am sore at heart. Where am I going? I am a clod of earth, and that house is a rock. I must have You."[52] This dismissive way of talking about the Ka'ba and the pilgrimage of *Hajj*, which is one of the five pillars of Islam and a mandatory duty for all Muslims capable of performing it, is of course not new or unique in the discourse of Sufism. However, it does put Attar's Rabi'a in a select group of people like Bayazid who seek nothing but God and refuse any intermediaries. God's response to Rabi'a's request illuminates the ironic twist of the exchange.

> The Real most high addressed her heart without intermediary: 'Oh, Rabi'a, you wash in the blood of eighteen thousand worlds. Don't you see that when Moses (peace be upon him) desired a vision, we cast a few motes of epiphany upon the mountain, and it shattered into forty pieces?'[53]

The irony is, of course, that even though God refuses to grant Rabi'a a vision, he does speak to "her heart without intermediary." God's response to Rabi'a also puts her on a parallel plane with Moses. So, in the first exchange between Rabi'a and God the emphasis is on Rabi'a's status as a *wali* and not as a woman. However, it is in the second exchange between Rabi'a and God that the gender dynamic shifts. This conversation between Rabi'a and God is not only the longest of the three exchanges in Rabi'a's entry but also the longest exchange of its kind in *Tazkirat*. Following Rabi'a's first conversation with God, we have two anecdotes relating Rabi'a's subsequent attempts to make a pilgrimage to the Ka'ba when each time the act of pilgrimage is inverted by the Ka'ba coming to greet Rabi'a instead. It is after these attempts that Rabi'a pledges to visit the Ka'ba one more time. "If last year the Ka'ba came to welcome me, this year I will go to welcome the Ka'ba."[54] It is during this pilgrimage that the second and the longest exchange between Rabi'a and God takes place.

When the time came, so Shaykh Abu Ali of Farmad relates, she set out into the desert and crawled for seven years until she arrived at ‘Arafat. A voice called out, “O claimant, what quest has drawn you here? If you want me to manifest myself just once, you will melt on the spot!” She said, “O Lord of might, Rabi’a does not have the means to attain that rank. I wish only for a drop of poverty.” The voice called out, “Rabi’a, poverty is the drought year of our wrath, which we have placed in men’s path. When no more than a hair’s width remains before they arrive in the presence of union with us, then things turn around, and union turns into separation. You are still within the seventy veils of your life. Until you come out from under all of these and take a step on our path and pass these seventy stations, you cannot speak of our poverty. Otherwise, behold!”

Rabi’a looked and saw a sea of blood suspended in the air. A voice called out, “This is the blood of our lovers who came seeking union with us. They alighted at the first way station, so no trace or sign of them appears anywhere in the two worlds.”

Rabi’a said, “O Lord of might, show me one characteristic of their state.” She immediately started menstruating. A voice spoke, “Their first station is to crawl for seven years on our path to pay homage to a clod of earth. When they near that clod, they start bleeding and they find the way closed to them.” Rabi’a was aflame, “O Lord, you do not allow me into your house. Nor will you let me stay in my house in Basra. Either leave me in my house in Basra or bring me to your house in Mecca. At first, I did not bow to the house—I wanted You. Now I am not even worthy of Your house.” She said this and returned to Basra and retired to a place of meditation.[55]

The exchange starts where the first conversation ended. God tells Rabi’a that she does not have the capacity for the union she seeks. However, here Rabi’a, while acknowledging that she does

not have the capacity yet, asks "for a drop of spiritual poverty (*faqr*)." Spiritual poverty in Sufi discourse is often defined as the state in which the wayfarer has no desires and has total reliance on God. Hujwiri (d. 465/1073), says, "The *faqir* is not simply one whose hand is empty of provisions, but one whose inner nature is void of desires."[56] Having no desires also means losing the self or ego's attributes. Abu Abdu'llah Muhammad ibn Khafif is reported as saying: "Poverty is privation of possessions, and passing from the self's qualities."[57] That is why many masters of the path equate spiritual poverty with annihilation in God (*fana fi'llah*). Asking for spiritual poverty indicates two things, first that Rabi'a at this point in the narrative has not yet attained this state, second that she is aware that spiritual poverty is not a state one can simply strive towards, but like most spiritual states it is only realized through God's grace. Hence Ansari says: "Poverty is the red sulphur, the green elixir which through striving cannot be acquired."[58] However, while God refuses to grant Rabi'a her request on the grounds that she is simply not yet ready for it, he also provides his definition of spiritual poverty as "the drought year of our wrath." Thus, the emphasis is placed on the hardship and affliction that accompanies spiritual poverty when there is no comfort (material or psychological), nothing to cling to, nothing to escape to but one's faith in God and one's sincerity in that quest. The significance of this passage is that in spite of this exchange the rest of the narrative on Rabi'a speaks to her spiritual poverty as the one distinctly identifiable state that we associate Rabi'a with.

Yet, at this point in the narrative God rebukes Rabi'a's plea for poverty and instead points her to a visually violent scene of "a sea of blood…of our lovers who came seeking union with us," meaning that of the many who come seeking union with God most perish violently without reaching the state of spiritual poverty. It is when Rabi'a asks to learn more about these unfortunate lovers that she is revealed to herself as just one of them. But the revelation also creates a gender construction of

Rabi'a as *wali* that does not exist in the same intensity before and after this passage. The moment Rabi'a asks her final question she starts menstruating. In one sense her bleeding corresponds to the blood of the slain lovers just before her eyes. But as evident in God's answer, her bleeding according to the *shari'a* law also prohibits her from *tawaf* (circumventing the Ka'ba) which is the most significant aspect of the Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca. In other words, her bleeding is both a sign of love and a sign of a gendered body, a woman's body deemed impure and hence prohibited. Attar's rendition of this passage (whatever its source) reveals Rabi'a not only to herself but also to the readers of *Tazkirat* as a woman worthy of being counted among slain lovers of God but not worthy of being admitted on the path of spiritual poverty, which according to God is a "men's path." In the English translation of *Tazkirat,* Paul Losensky translates "men's path" (*rahe mardan)* as "people's path," downplaying the gendered structure of the language, thinking as many linguists do that "men" here stands for all people. But Losensky also completely omits the part about menstruation, which brings the gender dynamic into sharp focus. What I have been trying to show in this chapter, however, is that Attar is quite aware of the discourse of Sufism as a male-centered discourse ignoring women's spiritual practices. His solution to this problem, however, in the form of introducing Rabi'a as the only woman *wali* worthy of a separate expansive entry in *Tazkirat*, inadvertently produces more gender dichotomies and ambiguities.

The conclusion of the passage is also significant in many ways. Rabi'a's emotional response is registered with the verb "*tafte shod*," meaning that she turned red. Her verbal response also mirrors that emotion in bursting into protest while realizing her impossible predicament. "O Lord, you do not allow me into your house. Nor will you let me stay in my house in Basra. Either leave me in my house in Basra or bring me to your house in Mecca. At first, I did not bow to the house—I wanted You. Now I am not even worthy of Your house." This passage also marks Rabi'a's entry into

a life of seclusion. From here to the end of Rabi'a's narrative she remains mostly confined to her residence in Basra, rarely venturing out and even reluctant to receive visitors. One could argue that such a life is not far from the norm for the ascetics of Basra in Rabi'a's lifetime. But, in Attar's narrative of Rabi'a, the life of seclusion placed before Rabi'a is the concluding path after the revelation of herself as a menstruating woman (body). In other words, Rabi'a's seclusion is no longer a choice but a forced confinement adhering to the gender norms that define woman's body as polluted and not worthy of performing religious rituals.

The biggest irony of Attar's narrative of Rabi'a is that while it declares Rabi'a among the lovers of God who may not reach him and may perish in despair and who may not be worthy of travelling "men's path" of spiritual poverty, it also proves in countless narratives and anecdotes that Rabi'a's defining state is that of spiritual poverty. How else can we account for Rabi'a's sincerity, her steadfastness in difficulties, her total reliance on God, her refusal to accept assistance from anyone but God, and her single-minded intensity in focusing on God and nothing else? Her final exchange with God testifies to this evolution. After seven days of fasting and not sleeping someone brings her a bowl of food. When she gets ready to eat her food the cat comes and spills it. She gets up to get water, the lamp goes out, and she falls and breaks the jug of water.

> She said: 'My God, I am so helpless, what are You doing to me?' She heard a voice say, "Beware Rabi'a! If you wish, I will bestow the bliss of the world upon you, but I will remove the grief for me from your heart, for the bliss of the world and grief for me cannot be joined in one heart. Rabi'a, you desire one thing, and we another. Our desire and yours cannot be joined in one heart."
>
> She said, 'When I heard this speech, I so detached my heart from the world and cut short my hopes for thirty years now I have performed each prayer as though it would be my last—I

pray the prayer of farewell. I made myself so independent of creatures, so cut off, that when day broke, for fear the created world would distract me, I prayed, "O Lord, so distract me that no one will distract me from you.'"[59]

This passage reminds one of what Abu Hamza Baghdadi says about poverty: "It is difficult to love poverty. Only the sincere have the patience to maintain it."[60] And Attar's Rabi'a proves again and again that she is sincere and she can travel the path of spiritual poverty. The gendered body no longer intrudes in this passage. Rabi'a's body is transformed from a bleeding, menstruating body signifying desire and prohibition to an ascetic, suffering body void of desires.

At the end, Attar's Rabi'a is both marked by her gender as a slave/courtesan and a woman bleeding for God but inhibited by her gender. As a *wali* (friend of God) her path to God and to men's acceptance is to discipline her female body in asceticism and to live a life of seclusion. As such she becomes an impossible role model for real practicing women of her time and many centuries to come.

Section 4: Rabi'a as the Female Rebuke to Men (the case of Hasan al-Basri in Attar)

One of the justifications of Rabi'a's inclusion in *Tazkirat* is the fact that she is "accepted among men." Later in the introduction Attar mentions Hasan al-Basri (who in Attar's narrative is a contemporary of Rabi'a) as one of the men of stature who approved of her. "When Hasan of Basra would not hold a prayer meeting unless a certain person were present, then certainly that person's memorial can be entered in the ranks of men."[61] In fact, one of the defining elements of Attar's Rabi'a is her exchanges with Hasan al- Basri in which Rabi'a assumes the role of a teacher or a

fellow traveler on the path (always in a more advanced spiritual position) rebuking Hasan's egoism and self-importance.

Obviously, there is a noticeable tension in Attar's story of Rabi'a between men's approval of Rabi'a (meaning men of religious spiritual stature, especially Hasan) and Rabi'a's rebuke of men. This tension can be traced back to reports collected by Sulami in *Early Sufi Women*. According to Sulami, Sufyan ath-Thawri, who was a prominent Islamic jurisprudence scholar esteemed for his knowledge of *hadith* and his commentary on the Qur'an, sought Rabi'a's "spiritual advice and supplications." Sulami also relates two anecdotes that exemplifies this relationship:

> Ja'far ibn Sulayman related: "Sufyan ath-Thawri took me by the hand and said about Rabi'a: 'Take me to the mentor. For when I am apart from her, I can find no solace.' When we entered her abode, Sufyan raised his hand and said, "Oh God, grant me safety!" At this, Rabi'a wept. "What makes you weep?" he asked. "You caused me to weep," she replied. "How?" he asked. She answered, "Have you not learned that true safety from the world is to abandon all that is in it? So how can you ask such a thing while you are still soiled with the world?"
>
> …
>
> Also on [Ja'far ibn Sulayman's] authority it is reported that ath-Thawri said in Rabi'a's presence, "How sorrowful I am!" "Do not lie!" she said. Say instead, 'How little is my sorrow!' If you were truly sorrowful, life itself would not please you."[62]

By referring to Rabi'a as his mentor or spiritual trainer (*mo'addeba'*), ath-Thawri (and by extension all the other men in the chain of transmission including Sulami himself) attest to Rabi'a's spiritual prowess and provide their seal of approval. On the other hand, in the anecdote reporting the exchanges between Rabi'a and ath-Thawri, Rabi'a's reproach highlights her asceticism while the

emphasis on her seclusion, weeping, and sorrow curbs the challenge she might otherwise pose for male privilege and power. Two other male contemporaries of Rabi'a also have similar exchanges with Rabi'a in Sulami's reports, namely Rabah [al-Qaysi] and Salih al-Murri. However, in none of these encounters do Rabi'a's challenges go as far as rebuking male egoism. Even in the case of Rabah, when Rabi'a chastises him for kissing a boy and admitting that he can love "something other than God," Sulami allows Rabah to overcome his embarrassment and have the final word: "On the contrary, this is a mercy that God Most High has put into the hearts of His slave."[63]

Rabi'a's relationship with Hasan al-Basri in Attar's *Tazkirat*, however, though based on the early reports of similar dynamics in Sulami (and possibly others), adds a new perspective both to Rabi'a's legendary character and to Hasan al-Basri's construction as a mystic. Unlike the male contemporaries of Rabi'a mentioned in Sulami's reports, Hasan al-Basri is a generation older than Rabi'a; Hasan al-Basri died when Rabi'a was still a young girl. Even though the historical data refute the possibility of any meaningful relationship between Rabi'a and Hasan, in Attar's *Tazkirat* numerous anecdotes put Rabi'a and Hasan together as fellow renunciants who knew each other and at times conversed about their mystical path or their relationship with God. As a result, the construction of both Rabi'a and Hasan as mystics/Sufis in the later Sufi discourses (especially in the Persian tradition influenced by Attar's *Tazkirat*) is very much indebted to the exchanges and relationships between Rabi'a and Hasan in Attar's *Tazkirat*.

As in the case of other renunciants of the period, the historical data on Hasan al-Basri are scarce. We know that his father was taken captive in Maysan (during the Islamic conquest) and brought to the Hijaz as a Persian slave or *mawla*. Hasan was born and raised in the Wadi al-Qura north of Medina, but eventually made his way to Basra where he spent the rest of his life.[64] The earlier sources mention him as a renowned charismatic ascetic/preacher who gave sermons and had

followers/students in Basra. Judging by remaining fragments of his sermons and *al-Risala fi'l-qadar* written in response to Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik on the subject of predestination, in addition to numerous quotes found in earlier sources like *Kitab al-Zuhd* by Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241/855) and *Kitab al-Bayan wa al-tabyin* by al-Jahiz, the early image of Hasan al-Basri emerges as a celebrated ascetic/preacher who like many other renunciants of his time not only "underwent austerities, devoted extraordinary amounts of time to Qur'anic recitation and prayer, and generally cultivated a solemn attitude towards life,"[65] but also believed in free will, judged people by their actions, and took a moral stand against unjust rulers.[66] When someone was asked to describe Hasan he said: "When you saw him, it was as if he had just buried his mother. When he sat, it was as a prisoner sits who is about to have his head struck off. When he talked, he talked the talk of a man who has been condemned to the Fire."[67] As Suleiman Mourad convincingly argues, the early image of Hasan does not point to any mystical/inward turn that later characterizes the Sufism of Baghdad and Khurasan.[68]

By the time Attar was writing his *Tazkirat*, the image of Hasan al-Basri had already gone through a reconstruction emphasizing his status as a figurehead mystic/ascetic paving the way for the later emergence of Sufism in Baghdad. However, according to Mourad it is in Attar's *Tazkirat* that Hasan al-Basri's image takes on legendary proportions.[69] Once again it is important to note that neither Hasan al-Basri nor Rabi'a—or any other Friends of God (*awliya*) in Attar's biographical compilation—is merely a historical character based on earlier reports, anecdotes, and recorded sayings. Rather they are complex reconstructions based on careful selections, omissions, and modifications fulfilling various purposes.

The role that Hasan al-Basri plays in Rabi'a's biographical entry in *Tazkirat* is simultaneously conventional and unorthodox. On the one hand, he is the male figurehead approving and solidifying Rabi'a's place within the discourse that is by and large dominated by men. Within

this conventional narrative, Hasan often plays a fellow traveler seeking Rabi'a's spiritual advice. On the other hand, in a more unorthodox fashion, Hasan also appears as a vain and conceited master who is rebuked and criticized by Rabi'a for his inability to let go of his self-importance. As Laury Silvers points out, the trope of women rebuking men in mystical love is employed with some noticeable frequency in the discourse of Sufism.[70] But in the reports that Silvers cites in her article, the formulaic polemical construction starts with the woman saying something that testifies to God's love for her; the man then corrects her and what he perceives as a woman's insolence in presuming God's love; in the final act the woman rebukes the man and schools him in the nature of God's love. This is how Silvers summarizes the "upbraiding trope" in her article.

> The stories are told from the men's perspective as upbraiding tales. The women surprise the men with their piety, sincerity, and direct knowledge of God. The women show the men up, and the men, now humbled, attest to the truth of women's claims. In the end, the stories serve to regulate love relationships with God within acceptable theological boundaries and reassert the men's own social role as guardians over women. Explicitly or implicitly, the men are the ultimate arbiters of the theological correctness of the women's claim to a direct relationship with God.[71]

Silver's interpretation of the "upbraiding trope," though to some extent applicable to Rabi'a's case and her numerous encounters with contemporary male religious figures, does not quite capture the complexities and the dynamics of the exchanges between Hasan al-Basri and Rabi'a in Attar's *Tazkirat*. To be sure, Hasan al-Basri's conventional role is to testify to Rabi'a's status as a friend of God (*wali*). But Rabi'a's encounters with Hasan are not as formulaic as the reports cited by Silvers. Not only are the encounters numerous and diverse, but Rabi'a and Hasan assume different roles, attitudes, and characters in each report. In some, Hasan (posing as a student) is asking Rabi'a a

question; in others Rabi'a is sending Hasan a message. In some, Hasan appears as a humble student at the seat of a master; in others he is a self-assured master annoyed with Rabi'a's (a woman's) claim to spiritual knowledge and experience. But most importantly, there are times when Attar's reporting makes it very difficult if not impossible for Hasan to recover his claim to spirituality. In at least two reports that are presented as a sequence in a story, Attar highlights Hasan's egoism and conceit in contrast to Rabi'a's sincerity and selflessness.

> It is related that one time Rabi'a happened to pass by Hasan's house. He was sitting on the roof of his meditation cell, weeping so much that water was dripping from the rainspouts. Several drops landed on Rabi'a. She investigated to find out where this water was coming from. When she realized what was happening, she said, "Hasan, if this weeping is from the foolish whims of the self, hold back your tears, so a sea will well up within you, such a sea that when you seek your heart there, you will not find it *except before a most powerful king*" [54:55]. These words were hard for Hasan to take, but he said nothing. One day he saw Rabi'a on the banks of the Euphrates. Hasan threw his prayer rug on the water and said, "Rabi'a, come here! Let's perform two *rak'as* of prayer."
>
> Rabi'a said, "Teacher, are you going to display the goods of the afterworld in the market of this world? You must do what others of your species are incapable of doing." So, Rabi'a threw her prayer rug into the air and said, "Hasan, come here, where you'll be hidden from the people's gaze." She then wished to win Hasan's heart over again. She said, "Teacher, what you did, a fish can do, and what I do, a fly can do. The real business is beyond both."[72]

Undoubtedly, these reports offer a very damaging portrait of Hasan. What are Attar's reasons for portraying Hasan in this light and what are the overall effects? In the reports cited by Silvers, the male figure rebuked is also the source of the anecdote, thus owning his humility (which becomes a

spiritual virtue in itself) and recovering his authority in telling of the story. But in Attar's reports of Hasan's rebuke, the source is obscure— "It's related that…"—thus denying Hasan the chance to even claim his lesson in humility. As a result, Hasan does not fully recover from the exposure of his self-aggrandizement and conceit, traits so contrary to the creed of friends of God (*awliya*). On the other hand, Rabi'a comes out of these reports of the exchanges with Hasan as a sincere, selfless, and compassionate believer who has more to teach than the male figurehead like Hasan who holds the title of a teacher (*ustad*, as Rabi'a calls him). At the end, although as Silvers points out "the men are the ultimate arbiters of the theological correctness of the women's claim to a direct relationship with God"[73] (Attar's *Tazkirat* is a testament to that), in Attar's entry on Rabi'a, they are also the embodiments of egoism and self-worship associated with the lower self (*nafs al-ammara*). In one report a group of men visit her and taunt her by listing all the virtues and privileges given to men. "Prophecy has never descended upon any woman. What do you have to boast of?" they ask.[74] She responds by saying: "Everything you said is true. But egoism, egotism, self-worship, and *I am your highest Lord* have not welled up in any woman."[75] Attar's choice in reconstructing the relationship and the conversations between Rabi'a and Hasan is therefore a deliberate attempt at juxtaposing male power, privilege, and status with "egoism, egotism, and self-worship," while implying that being a woman, i.e. not having access to power, privilege, and status, becomes an asset in a spiritual path. The effects of Attar's commentary on gender via the presentation of the dynamics between Rabi'a and Hasan is to place Rabi'a above the very men who approve her and sanctify her within the male-dominated discourse of Sufism. It is as if it is not enough for Rabi'a to achieve an equal status among men, she needs to surpass them in order to be included as the only woman with a separate entry in Attar's *Tazkirat*.

Section 5: Rabi'a among other Rabi'as (The unmarried Rabi'a attracting suitors, the married Rabi'a as obedient wife, the unmarried old recluse)

Adding to the confusion around Rabi'a al-Adawiyya's life is the fact that she was not the only woman ascetic named Rabi'a in this period. Rabi'a al-Azdiyya and Rabi'a bint Isma'il were also named in some of the sources such as Sulami's *Early Sufi Women* and al-Jawzi's *Sifat as-safwa*. Very little is known about Rabi'a Azdiyya. Evidently, she was known for her *wara*' or the way of scrupulousness, and the only anecdote relating to her is the manner in which she refuses Ibn Zayd's (a contemporary ascetic) offer of marriage. She says to him: "Oh lustful one! What did you see in me that aroused your desire? Why don't you ask a lustful person like yourself to marry you?"[76] The sources have more information on Rabi'a bint Isma'il, most probably because her husband Ahmad ibn Abi al-Hawari (d. 230/845), a famous Sufi of Damascus, transmitted many of her sayings and anecdotes. In Sulami's account of Rabi'a bint Isma'il, we learn that she was a wealthy woman who spent her fortune on her husband and his Sufi companions. We also learn that she had visions and like many ascetics of her time she was very mindful of the Day of Judgment.[77] Ibn al-Jawzi's account of Rabi'a bint Isma'il is more elaborate however, especially as it focuses more on her relationship with her husband al-Hawari. According to al-Jawzi, even though Rabi'a and al-Hawari lived as a married couple, Rabi'a encouraged her husband to take more wives so that she could devote most of her time to God.[78]

In *Qut al-qulub*, which is an earlier source than al-Jawzi's, its author al-Makki confuses Rabi'a al-Azdiyya with Rabi'a al-Adawiyya and mistakenly identifies Ibn Zayd as Rabi'a al-Adawiyya's suitor. As mentioned by Rkia E. Cornell, "The widespread popularity of *Qut al-qulub*, has caused this mistaken version to become better known than the original."[79] Margaret Smith includes the mistaken version in her discussion of "Rabi'a's Choice of Celibacy."[80] We also find

traces of this confusion in Attar's *Tazkirat* in anecdotes where Hasan al-Basri proposes to Rabi'a al-Adawiyya or where other people ask Rabi'a why she does not get married.

Rabi'a bint Isma'il was also confused with Rabi'a al-Adawiyya in many later sources. The most recent example of this confusion appears in Margaret Smith's comprehensive work on Rabi'a al-Adawiyya, *Rabi'a the Mystic* (later published as *Muslim Women Mystics: The Life and Work of Rabi'a and other Women Mystics in Islam*). Ironically, Smith is well aware of the confusion between the two Rabi'a's, which she deemed "unnecessary."[81] Nevertheless, due to the unavailability of some of the sources to Smith at the time she was writing her manuscript on Rabi'a, Smith ends up quoting a poem attributed to Rabi'a bint Isma'il in al-Jawzi's *Sifat as-safwa* as verses by Rabi'a al-Adawiyya.

I have made Thee the Companion of my heart,
But my body is available for those who desire its company,
And my body is friendly towards its guests,
But the Beloved of my heart is the guest of my soul.[82]

Rkia E. Cornell offers a more accurate translation of these verses in *Sifat as-safwa*:

I have made You the One who speaks to me in the depths of my soul,
While I made my body lawful for the one who desires to sit with me.
My body is my intimate gift to my worldly companion,
While my heart's Beloved is my true Intimate in the depths of my soul.[83]

These verses as quoted in *Sifat as-safwa* relate to Rabi'a bint Isma'il's understanding of *uns* or intimacy. Here she clearly distinguishes between the lawful intimacy of the body (sexual intercourse) and the intimacy of the heart.

As a result of the above confusion, we have conflicting portraits of Rabi'a al-Adawiyya, one in which she is an ascetic recluse in her midlife (or older) occasionally giving advice to other visiting ascetics like ath-Thawri, one in which she is a younger woman attracting suitors and proposals of marriage, and finally one in which she is a married woman (or a courtesan) seeking the intimacy of God. Once again, we have a composite image of Rabi'a drawn from different women with completely different circumstances of life. The confusion between Rabi'a al-Adawiyya and Rabi'a al-Azdiyya is more understandable because they were from the same city (Basra) and lived approximately at the same time. But confusing Rabi'a bint Isma'il, who was from a different region (Syria) and was married to a well-known Sufi, with Rabi'a al-Adawiyya is indeed a strange phenomenon. In "Legend of Rabi'a of Basra: Christian Antecedents, Muslim Counterparts," Julian Baldick tries to explain this bizarre mix-up by arguing that Rabi'a bint Isma'il did not exist and she was only constructed as a counterpart to Rabi'a of Basra. Given that Rabi'a bint Isma'il's husband, al-Hawari was a famous Sufi whose life story and sayings appear in many biographies, the textual evidence overwhelmingly refutes Baldick's assertions. The answer to this puzzling mix-up as I have shown in this chapter is in a strong inclination in the Sufi community to have Rabi'a al-Adawiyya represent all Sufi women and as a result attach many anecdotes and sayings and verses associated with various Sufi women to one woman.

Section 6: Conclusion

To this day, we know very little about Rabi'a al-Adawiyya. To be sure, she did exist. She was an ascetic in second-century Basra who was revered for her spiritual beliefs and practices. But the historical Rabi'a was soon buried under the elaborate constructions and representations of her, which

gradually take shape in the writings from al-Makki to Attar, even to present-day Western scholarship. Although other contemporary women ascetics like Rayhana have talked about their exclusive love for God in their poetry and their sayings, Rabi'a alone is chosen to represent and/or introduce the concept of disinterested love. With a love poem of obscure origins, Rabi'a is thrust into the discourse of Sufism and from there until her intricate portrait emerges in Attar's *Tazkirat* as the only woman saint worthy of a separate entry, she gradually becomes a composite of many spiritual women: an ascetic recluse, a sincere lover, a difficult teacher, a slave freed from servitude because of her devotion, a rebuker of men, a repentant courtesan, a young woman rejecting suitors, a married woman abstaining from marital intercourse, a woman denying and disciplining her body as a way of attaining spiritual poverty. In short, she becomes the exceptional woman of Sufism.

This composite image of Rabi'a is symptomatic of a masculinist Sufi discourse, which at best (as evidenced in Attar's *Tazkirat*) simultaneously denies and affirms women's spiritual presence as a rare possibility available to exceptional women who can perform the extraordinary feat of overcoming their gender, and becoming a "man of the path." The composite image also overshadows and renders invisible all the real historical women who have made small imprints in the discourse of Sufi men, leaving traces in the hagiographies from Sulami to Attar.

As a result, the Rabi'a composite becomes so solidified in the discourse of Sufism that even contemporary scholars do not stop to question its validity or its function. A significant example of this uncritical approach is Margaret Smith's book on Rabi'a, which still offers the most comprehensive study of the subject while at the same time presenting the composite image of Rabi'a without critical analysis. The fact that Rabi'a is still heralded as the champion of "disinterested love" based on a love poem of questionable origins, while Rayhana's well-known and documented love poems are completely overlooked by Sufi scholars and commentators, speaks volumes about the

pervasiveness of Rabi'a's overpowering presence, or what I call the "Rabi'a effect." To break down this composite and neutralize the effect, as I have done in this chapter, acts as a disruptive move. It challenges the perception of an iconic saintly figure who has inspired and influenced many men and women on the path to spiritual realization. But it also frees Rabi'a from the contradictory and at times impossible images imposed on her and allows her to explode, to multiply, and to enable the presence of many women, past and present, walking the spiritual paths in their unique ways. Unable to use comments in notes – check printed copy

[1] Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 1.
[2] Christopher Melchert, "Origins and Early Sufism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 15.
[3] Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din* (Cairo: Dar al-Shu'ab, n.d.), volume 4, 2598.
[4] Carl W. Ernst, "The Stages of Love in Early Persian Sufism, from Rabi'a to Ruzbihan," in *Classical Persian Sufism: from its Origins to Rumi*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (London: KNP, 1993), 439.
[5] Ibid.
[6] After I completed my chapter on Rabi'a al-Adawiyya, I became aware of Rkia E. Cornell's dissertation "Rabi'a from Narrative to Myth: The Tropics of Identity of a Muslim Woman Saint," which she successfully defended in the Faculty of Theology at the Free University of Amsterdam in November of 2013. While Cornell and I arrive at the same conclusion regarding the composite image of Rabi'a and its construction into myth, we differ in the interpretation of this iconic emergence. Cornell simply views the process in terms of cultural construct. I however, argue that the construct's main objective (consciously or unconsciously) is to obscure the presence of real and historical women mystics of the ages. Moreover, Cornell and I differ in our textual emphasis according to our linguistic abilities. Cornell focuses on Arabic literature and can shed significant light on the early Arabic sources on Rabi'a. I, on the other hand analyze Attar's major contribution to the legend of Rabi'a and point to a significant mistranslation that is symptomatic of reading Sufi literature without sufficient attention to gender.
[7] Abdel Rahman Badawi, *Rabi'a al-Adawiyya, Martyr of Divine Love*, trans. by Muhammad Tahrirchi. (Terhran: Mowla Publications, 1387/2008), 137.
[8] Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 3.
[9] Sarraj mentions Rabi'a only once.
[10] Melchert, "Origins," 4-10.
[11] Margaret Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics: The Life and Work of Rabi'a and Other Women* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 125.
[12] Ibid., 62 and 93.
[13] Rkia Elaroui Cornell, introduction to *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr an-niswa al-Muta'abbidat as-sufiyyat*, by Abu Abd ar-Rahman as-Sulami, trans. Rkia E. Cornell (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1999), 60.
[14] Ibid., 78.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ernst, "The Stages of Love," 439
[17] Cornell, Introduction, 62.
[18] Melchert, "Origins," 8-9. See also Laury Silvers, "Early Pious, Mystic Women," 32.
[19] Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, 74-81.
[20] Ibid., 78.

[21] In her dissertation "Rabi'a from Narrative to Myth," Cornell identifies another source before Sulami that connects Rabi'a to love mysticism. In the treatise titled *al-Qasd wa-I-ruju'il Allah* (God as the Goal and Return), Muhasibi states: "Rabi'a al-Adawiyya would say at the coming of night, 'The night has come, the darkness has mingled (*ikhtalata al-zalam),* and every lover is left alone with his beloved. Now I am alone with you, my Beloved.'" See Cornell, "Rabia from Narrative to Myth," 34. Muhasibi as referenced in Cornell: Abu 'Abdullah al-Harith ibn Asad al-Muhasibi, al-Qasd wa-I-ruju' ila Allah, ed. 'Abd al-Qadir Ahmad 'Ata (Cairo: Dar al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1980), 104.
[22] *Encyclopedia Islamica*, 8:355b
[23] See Zhara Taheri, *The Presence and Absence of Women in Sufi Texts*, Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA), Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2007, 82-92.
[24] Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, 94.
[25] Jawzi, *Sifat as-safwa* in *Early Sufi Women*, 306-308.
[26] Joseph Lumbard, "From *Hubb* to '*Ishq*: The development of Love in Early Sufism," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18, no. 3 (2007).
[27] In her dissertation "Rabi'a from Narrative to Myth," Cornell argues that Rabi'a's brand of "essential asceticism" as opposed to the typical "instrumental asceticism" of her contemporaries explains Rabi'a's inclinations towards love mysticism. "In the asceticism associated with the trope of Rabi'a the Ascetic, outward practices of asceticism are subordinated to their inner meaning. I argue that since the practice of essential asceticism is more an approach to God than a rejection of the world, it foreshadows the Love mysticism for which Rabi'a al'Adawiyya was to become most famous." Cornell, "Rabi'a from Narrative to Myth," 29.
However, Cornell agrees that other women mystics, especially the three women of al-Ubulla (Rayhana, Hayyuna, and Sha'wana) discoursed on love more eloquently and frequently than Rabi'a and at the end it seems that their life and sayings were conflated with Rabi'a's. Cornell, 123-125. Moreover, since according to Cornell, Rayhana was a black slave, it is possible that Rabi'a was preferred by her contemporaries and elevated as a representative of women proponents of Love mysticism.
[28] Maria M. Dakake, "Guest of the Inmost Heart: Conceptions of the Divine Beloved among Early Sufi Women," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 3, no.1 (2007), 72-97.
[29] Ibid., 72.
[30] Laury Silvers, "'God Loves Me': The Theological Content and Context of Early Pious and Sufi Women's Sayings on Love," *Journal for Islamic Studies* 30 (2010): 59.
[31] Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, 84.
[32] Farid al-Din Attar, *Tazkirat al-awliya,* ed. Muhammad Este'lami (Tehran: Zavvar Publishing, 1981). For the English translation of the text I have relied heavily on Paul Losensky's translation although I have at times modified his translation and at least in one occasion dispute its accuracy.
[33] Farid ad-Din Attar, *Farid al-Din Attar's Memorial of God's Friends: Lives and Sayings of Sufis*, ed. and trans. Paul Losensky (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 41.
[34] Ibid,15.
[35] Ibid, 41.
[36] Paul Losensky, "The Creative Compiler: The Art of Rewriting in Attar's *Tazkirat al-awliya*," in *The Necklace of The Pleiades: 24 Essays on Persian Literature, Culture and Religion*," ed. Franklin Lewis and Sunil Sharma (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2010), 107-119.
[37] Ibid., 116-118.
[38] Ibid., 118.
[39] Losensky, introduction to Attar, *Memorial of God's Friends*, 3.
[40] Attar, *Memorial of God's Friends*, 97.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] For an example of misogyny in Persian Sufi discourse see my chapter on Hujwiri's *Kashf al-mahjub*.
[44] Attar, *Memorial of God's Friends,* 98.
[45] Ibid, 189 (Bayazid), 245-255 (Sufyan).
[46] Julian Baldick, "The Legend of Rabi'a of Basra: Christian Antecedents, Muslim Counterparts," *Religion* 20 (1990): 233-247.
[47] Shams ad-Din Aflaki, *Manaqib al-arfin*, ed. Tahsin Yazici, Tehran, Donya-ye Ketab,1983, vol. 1, 555.
[48] Cornell, Introduction, 54-60.
[49] Michael A. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press,1996), 153.

[50] Attar, *Memorial of God's Friends*, 45.
[51] Heidi A. Ford, "Hierarchical Inversions, Divine Subversions: The Miracles of Rabi'a al-Adawiya," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 15, no. 2 (1999): 22.
[52] Attar, *Memorial of God's Friends*, 100.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid., 101.
[55] Ibid., 101-102.
[56] Hujwiri, quoted in *Spiritual Poverty in Sufism*, ed. Javad Nurbakhsh, 30.
[57] Ibid., 13.
[58] Ibid., 9.
[59] Attar, *Memorial of God's Friends*, 108.
[60] Javad Nurbakhsh, *Spiritual Poverty in Sufism*, 25.
[61] Attar, *Memorial of God's Friends*, 97.
[62] Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, 76 and 80.
[63] Ibid., 78.
[64]Hellmut Ritter, "Ḥasan al-Baṣrī," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. (Leiden Brill Online, 2015).
[65] Melchert, "Origins," 3.
[66] Ritter, "Hasan al-Basri."
[67] Melchert, "Origins," 8.
[68] Suleiman Mourad, *Early Islam between Myth and History: Hasan al-Basri (d. 110H/728CE) and the Formation of his Legacy in Classical Islamic Scholarship* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006).
[69] Ibid.
[70] Silvers, "'God Loves Me,'" 53-58.
[71] Ibid., 55.
[72] Attar, *Memorial of God's Friends*, 103-104.
[73] Silvers, "'God Loves Me,'" 55.
[74] Attar, *Memorial of God's Friends*, 109.
[75] Ibid., 110.
[76] Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, 128.
[77] Ibid., 138-140.
[78] Ibid., 314-318.
[79] Ibid., 128.
[80] Smith, *Rabia*, 10; Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*, 29. Smith cites Makki's *Qut al-qulub* and L. Massignon's *Textes Inedits* as her sources.
[81] Smith, Rabi'a, 140; Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*, 170.
[82] Smith, *Rabi'a*, 98; Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*, 122.
[83] Jawzi, *Sifat as-Safwa*, in *Early Sufi Women*, 316.

Chapter 4: Feminist Readings of Two Sufi Narratives: Reinterpreting Attar and Rumi

In the first and second chapter of this dissertation I focused on hagiographical and biographical Sufi discourses. Although the texts I examined fall under the category of historical discourses, the biographies of the saints as religiously motivated pre-modern historical writings are generally more concerned with creating inspirational and devotional texts than with verifiable historical facts. As such pre-modern Sufi hagiographies and histories can be viewed as multidisciplinary texts on the border of history and literature. While it would be difficult to assess the understanding of the Sufi community of readers, either pre-modern or contemporary, regarding the distinction between history and literature, it is possible to say that Sufi woman as an exceptional historical construct (as exemplified by Rabi'a al-Adawiyya) was conceived through the scattered and minimized references in the Sufi hagiographies and biographies. However, parallel to this construction, we also encounter representations of women in Sufi literature, which aim to reinforce the narrative of the exceptional Sufi woman. In this chapter I will focus on two of these representations as a way of providing feminist interpretations that would resist the male-centered discourse of Sufism and provide spaces for reimaging women's participation as a spiritual seeker.

Classical Persian Sufi literature, roughly covering the period from the fourth/tenth century to the seventh/thirteenth century, is a vast body of narrative and lyrical poetry and poetic prose. From the simple poignant quatrains of Baba Tahir in the local dialect of Hamadan to the quatrains attributed to Abu Sa'id-i Abu'l-Khayr (d. 440/1049), a remarkable flowering of early Sufi poetry took place. The vast mystical *masnavi*s[1] of Sana'i were followed by the more elaborate works of the Persian poetical renaissance of the sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth centuries. The Sufi epic of *Mantiq al-tayr* (*The Conference of the Birds*) by Attar (d. 618/1221) and ecstatic ghazals[2] and

didactic *Masnavi* of Rumi (d. 672/1273) are some well-known examples that defined and shaped classical Persian literature. Persian Sufi prose literature also produced masterpieces, such as Attar's *Tazkirat al-awliya* (*Memorial of God's Friends*), the *Munajat* (Invocations) of Khawja 'Abdallah Ansari (d. 481/1089), and the *Sawanih* (the first treatise on love) of Ahmad Ghazali (d.517/1123 or 520/1126).[3]

Critical readings and interpretations generally seek to interpret Persian Sufi poetry and prose by explaining the hermeneutics of Sufi symbolism and terminology. This approach, which dates back to the classical commentaries on Sufi poetry (i.e. Bakharzi's *Fusus al-adab*), continues to the present time with Muhammad Taqi Ja'fari's interpretation of the *Masnavi* in sixteen volumes (1970), Abdul-Hossein Zarrinkub's commentary on the *Masnavi* in Sirr-i Nay (1985), Leonard Lewisohn's scholarship on Attar in *Attar and the Persian Sufi Tradition* (2006), and other literary interpretations of Persian Sufism in both the West and the East. However, these readings as a general rule do not employ critical literary theories developed in and applied to Western literature. Here and there we see traces of influences, as for example the use of Northrup Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* in Leonard Lewisohn's readings of Attar. But by and large the field of Persian classical literature studies is resistant and/or indifferent to Western literary theories in their critical readings. The reasons for this are numerous and beyond the purpose of this study. However, the result is that no new interpretations or engagements with classical Persian literature are produced. It is as if classical Sufi literature is trapped in its own symbolism, forever producing the same esoteric knowledge available only to a very few.

There have been a few exceptions to the above general trend in readings of Sufi literature. Significantly, most of these exceptions relate to Rumi's poetry, perhaps because of Rumi's newfound popularity in the West. Two outstanding examples of this exceptional trend are *Reading*

Mystical Lyric and The Case of Jalal al-Din Rumi (1998) by Fatemeh Keshavarz and *Rumi and the Hermeneutics of Eroticism* (2007) by Mahdi Tourang. Keshavarz explains her "broad comparative perspective" that uses theories of Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger in interpreting Rumi's lyrical poetry as a productive engagement of "twentieth-century readers and critics" who are influenced by Western theories. Tourang, on the other hand, uses Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to examine the bawdy passages (containing many explicit sexual images) in Rumi's *Masnavi* to explore the link between eroticism and esotericism in his poetic work.

Yet, even in the few exceptions that apply Western theories to Sufi literature, the issue of gender remains unexplored.[4] One reason often cited for the lack of interest in analyzing Sufi literature from the point of view of gender is the somewhat reluctant acknowledgment that Sufi literature is male-centered at best, and misogynist at worst. As a result, many scholars or students of Persian Sufism shy away from gender theories, perhaps because they may think that applying these theories to Sufi literature would not add much to our enjoyment and understanding of this literature. There seems to be an unacknowledged consensus that to enjoy Sufi literature one must overlook its male-centeredness.

The history of feminist literary criticism in response to the male-authored canon of Western literature however, provides a road map not only for the importance of examining the gender concepts of literary works by men, but also for methodologies and theories employed in such examinations. The early feminist literary criticism in the 1970s that emerged during the heyday of the women's movement in the US and other Western countries focused some of its attention on the male-authored canon and the way gendered relations of power were inscribed in literary texts as an unquestioned and unexamined given of masculinist culture, leading to the re-inscription and

valorization of male dominance and female subordination. Judith Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader* (1978) is a classic example.

Fetterley's reading of canonical works in American literature written by male authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Henry James, and F. Scott Fitzgerald shows that often the narrative strategies of these texts oblige the woman reader to identify as male and against herself. Fetterley's call (among others) upon women readers to "become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted in us" might seem too naive to contemporary feminist readers and critics who not only apply gender analysis to literature in a variety of ways, but also have a more complicated and theoretically sophisticated understanding of gender. Moreover, following the early focus on the male literary canon, many feminist readers and critics (Elaine Showalter among others) made a deliberate choice to focus on women writers in an effort to include them in the canon of literature, rather than spend time on male writers' problematic representations of women.

Nevertheless, Fetterley's call is still relevant in certain areas of literature where male writers dominate the field. From reading classical works by male authors, like John Milton, William Shakespeare, and Geoffrey Chaucer, to reading and responding to major male theorists like Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, who have had a significant impact on literary criticism, feminist criticism has probed male writings on the question of gender and has gone beyond that to examine issues of race, class, sexuality, and other markers of difference and inequality. As Annette Kolodny once observed, "to question the source of the aesthetic pleasures" in reading classical works of literature written by male authors "means only that aesthetic response is once more invested with epistemological, ethical, and moral concerns."[5]

Sufi literature is yet another example of male authorship. Significantly, Sufi literature takes up an added function in Sufi communities as inspirational and didactic literature and thus affects Sufi readers in ways that other literature does not. A feminist reading of Sufi literature can be viewed thus as a direct intervention among the community of believers who unwittingly and unknowingly adopt the masculinist culture of medieval Sufism through its inspirational and didactic narratives.

Feminist theories of gender and sexuality can shed light on the gendered construction of Sufi discourses in literature and offer ways of resisting phallogocentric discourse. Is desire gendered? Does the Sufi text sustain the dichotomy between body and soul, ego (*nafs*) and heart (*ruh*), or does it leave room for fluidity and/or subversions? Is Sufi love heterosexual or homoerotic? Do women read Sufi literature differently from men? What are some of the gendered stereotypes of Sufi literature? What are some of the feminist reading strategies in resisting the homosocial order in Sufism and subverting them?

The task of addressing the concepts of gender and sexuality in classical Sufi literature requires a careful selection of material and methodology. My first criterion for selecting materials is to choose writers and works that have been the most influential in the shaping of a Sufi discourse. This has directed my attention to Attar and Rumi, generally thought to be the most influential figures in the literature of Sufism. Although Attar is less known outside the Persian-speaking world, there he enjoys the same kind of canonical status as Rumi. Attar's *Ilahi-nama* and *Tazkirat al-awliya*, like Rumi's *Masnavi* and *Divan*, are still read and recited in Sufi lodges across the Persian-speaking territories today.

My second criterion is to choose material that problematizes woman's position in Persian Sufi literature and expose the contradictions in traditional Sufi readings that ignore woman's disruptive presence and/or significant contribution in order to maintain the masculinist status quo.

For example, in the narratives I have selected to write about from Attar's *Ilahi-nama* and Rumi's *Masnavi* not only do women play an active role in claiming their right to spiritual knowledge, they also expose the violence and hypocrisy involved in erasing feminine voice, agency, and embodiment as a price for upholding male privilege and a male symbolic order.

But the feminist readings I offer in this chapter also emphasize differences in the way each author and its interpretive community views woman's role in Sufi discourse and beyond. In the case of Attar, as I explain in my analysis, the interpretive community disregards Attar's progressive views of women and his critique of the masculinist ideology that abuses them in favor of a reading that conforms to a standard and gender-neutral view of renunciation as an organizing principle of the text. In Rumi's narrative however, it is the author himself who provides a sexist interpretation of his own narrative, which if read through a feminist lens overturns the author's intention and provides an articulation for feminine spirituality. While in both readings I'm "resisting" the standard interpretation of the literature I'm analyzing, in Attar's narrative I'm reading against the interpretive community, whereas in Rumi I'm reading against Rumi the author.

Feminist theories are the main anchor in my analysis. I use Luce Irigaray's "sensible transcendence" in my reading of Rumi, which I explain before starting my analysis. Although my reading of Attar is also a feminist critical reading, here I use the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan and Salvoj Zizek to explain Attar's rendering of desire as male, object of desire as female, and sainthood as a female position. Thus, my use of psychoanalytic discourse as a critical tool is limited in its scope and its aim. I emphasize this not only because Attar and Lacan/Zizek have contrasting viewpoints of the divine, but also because as a Sufi aspirant and a feminist critic I do not fully accept Lacan's (or Zizek's) views of the divine and woman. Nevertheless, I think

psychoanalysis remains one of the most significant critical tools in discussions of desire and subjectivity.

Finally, the feminist reading of the two Sufi narratives I offer in this chapter, one on Attar's *Ilahi-nama* and the other on Rumi's *Masnavi*, are products of many years of refining my feminist critical understanding. To this date, I have published one Persian and one English article on my reading of Attar's *Ilahi-nama*. Similarly, my discussion of Rumi's *Masnavi* first appeared as a conference paper and later as an article.[6] Over the years, I have revised my readings of these two narratives, always striving to return to them with fresh perspectives and more critical engagement. This in itself is a testament of love for both Sufi literature and feminist literary criticism. It also speaks to the way I see these two narratives as cornerstones of engagement with gender in Sufi literature.

Section 1: Renunciation or Feminine Sainthood?

Breaking the Cycle of Male Desire in Attar's *Ilahi-nama*

The Persian Sufi poet Farid ad-Din Attar (d. 618/1221) does not enjoy as much celebrity in the West as Rumi, the poet who followed in his footsteps in mystical poetry. In the Persian-speaking world however, Attar is as venerated and as significant as Rumi. Not much is known about Attar's personal life. His pen name *Attar* (druggist) and certain allusions in his work suggest he was a medieval pharmacist who lived most of his life in the city of Nishapur in the greater Khurasan. It is also believed that he died during the Mongol invasion and the massacre of the population. Although his impressive corpus of work is deeply rooted in the Sufi tradition and his profound mystical understanding is comparable to that of the Sufi masters and sages of his time, we know close to

nothing about his attachment to any Sufi group, Sufi order, or Sufi master.[7] Whatever impression we have of Attar is therefore informed by our encounter with his works. Leaving aside what has been attributed to Attar but disputed in scholarship, Attar's corpus comprises five major works of poetry and one important prose work. Two of these works have received the most attention both in Attar scholarship and the general readership of his work. *The Conference of the Birds* (*Mantiq al-tayr*), the tale of the spiritual quest of thirty birds in search of their mystical guide, the Simurgh, is generally considered Attar's most significant poetic composition. His *Memorial of God's Friends* (*Tazkirat al-awliya*), a compilation of biographies of Sufi saints, is also acknowledged as one of his most important contributions to both Sufi literature and Persian prose. I have already discussed Attar's *Tazkirat al-awliya* in chapter three of this dissertation, in relation to his biographical entry on Rabi'a al-Adawiyya. In this chapter I will focus on Attar's *Ilahi-nama* which has received comparatively less attention.

In its construction, *Ilahi-nama* is very close to the literature of its time. Following his literary predecessor, the mystical poet Sanai, Attar uses the poetic form of the *masnavi* (rhyming couplets) in narrating a multitude of stories within a main framework. Similarly, like his predecessor Sanai and his successor Rumi, in the art of mystical *masnavi*, Attar draws from numerous sources of literature in medieval Islam. He is well-versed in the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition, but he is also familiar with medieval romances like *Barlaam and Josaphat* and the *Tale of Sinbad*.[8] He knows folktales as well as the tales of the prophets and the legends of the kings.

However, what distinguishes Attar from other medieval poets of his time is his choice of the stories and his treatment of them. In her foreword to John Andrew Boyle's English translation of *Ilahi-nama*, renowned Sufi scholar Annemarie Schimmel observes:

> Beggars and lunatics, often endowed with an insight which purely rational people lack, are made the mouthpieces of social criticism, and Attar not infrequently puts quite irreverent speeches into their mouths; this tendency is not prominent in Sanai's work, and is almost completely absent from Rumi's *Mathnavi.*…The light melancholic veil that seems to cover many of Attar's tales, in scenes of outbursts against God and strange behavior, [is] often torn asunder, and the poor, maltreated and despairing human being stands before the reader in all nakedness.[9]

In other words, there is a sense of egalitarian justice in Attar's work that we do not encounter anywhere else in the discourse and literature of Sufism. It is therefore not surprising that we find in Attar's *Ilahi-nama* a unique and rare challenge to a discourse informed by an androcentric worldview.

Like his other long mystical poems, Attar's *Ilahi-nama* has a framing narrative structure into which numerous stories are inserted. The framing narrative is about a king and his six sons. One by one the sons are asked to express their utmost wish, whereupon the king offers stories illustrating why the wish in question is not worth pursuing. In the discourse on men's desires, among the king and his six sons, "woman" occupies the primary position. Her presence and her story is the first response to the question of "What does a man desire?" To the first son's desire for the virgin daughter of the king of the fairies "to whom no one compares in beauty and mind," the king offers this reproachful answer:

> The father said, Alas, you're lustful and drunk from it,
> when a man's heart is imprisoned in sexual desire, all the coins of his being will be spent.
> But a woman who walks manly on the path is a complete stranger to such lust, just as that woman who separated from her husband became the head of men in the court of God.[10]

The transition from the lustful male/prince with woman as his object of desire to woman as the agent or subject who becomes a stranger to such lust and thus leads men in the court of God is not only abrupt but also problematic. In the Sufi discourse on man and his desire, woman finds herself in a new position. Whose desire is she renouncing? What lesson is to be drawn from that renunciation? In what way is/isn't her renunciation a "manly" act?

Scholars of Attar, taking their cue from Hellmut Ritter, who dedicated his magnum opus, *Das Meer der Seele*, to the study of Attar, read *Ilahi-nama* in the context of *zuhd* (piety) as renouncing worldly desires for mystical knowledge or experience. However, what the traditional readers of *Ilahi-nama* have completely overlooked is the way in which the first story of *Ilahi-nama,* in answer to the first son's desire, turns the whole narrative of renunciation on its head. The protagonist of Attar's first narrative of renunciation is not relinquishing her own desire(s) but resisting to and fleeing from male desire, and she is eventually driven (pushed) into sainthood as the only position that would allow her to escape the vicious cycle of male desire and its violence. Attar's narrative not only exposes the full absurdity and violence of the phallic nature of desire by employing a woman protagonist who is cast as its ultimate object, but also posits sainthood as a feminine position and the only possibility of breaking the cycle of male desire.

However, Attar's move from the economy of the phallus to sainthood is only possible by creating two competing modes of narration. On the one hand, Attar maps phallic desire as a historically constructed world, providing facts and details that correspond to the woman's position in a system of desire (Islamic and medieval) privileging the phallus. On the other hand, Attar creates a system parallel to the phallic order (not specified in religious terms) that defies historicity by elevating the woman to the status of the divine through an act of miracle and effecting social change through her intervention as a saint/healer. In a reading that brings these competing modes of

narration to light, Attar's story creates more questions than answers. What does renunciation mean vis-a-vis male or female sexual desire? Is woman trapped in the phallic order of desire? Is sainthood achieved through violent oppression?

Attar's narrative, like most of medieval literature, is based on older versions. As scholars like Heshmat Moayyed and Franklin D. Lewis have pointed out, Attar's tale of *zan-e parsa* (the pious/chaste woman) is based on a similar story that appears in a Shi'ite *hadith* text, *Furu al-Kafi*, by Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Ya'qub Kulayni (d. 329/941).[11] The story was recorded by Kulayni as a Hebrew tale which probably "entered into Arabic along with the literature about the Hebrew prophets (Isra'iliyyat)."[12] But Attar not only turns the story into an Islamic tale, he also, apart from changing significant details (discussed later in my analysis), retells the story in the context of male desire and a lesson in renunciation.

Here is the plot summary of the medieval Islamic part of Attar's narrative I define as phallic and historical. A husband decides to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca. He leaves his wealth/property and his wife (who is beautiful) in care of a younger brother. The brother gradually falls in love with his sister-in-law and wants to seduce her. She refuses his advances and reminds him of his moral/religious obligations. The brother, angered by her rejection of him, finds four witnesses to testify against her moral character as an adulterer, and a judge sentences her to death by stoning. After she is stoned and left to die, a Bedouin passing by hears her cries for help and takes her home and attends to her until she regains her health and beauty. This time, the Bedouin falls in love with her and wants to marry her. Again, she refuses him, telling him the story of what has befallen her. The Bedouin is persuaded to accept her rejection of his offer, but his black slave becomes the next man who falls in love and wants to possess her.[13] When she refuses him contemptuously, the slave kills the Bedouin's infant child and puts the bloody knife under the woman's pillow. Although the

woman succeeds in persuading the Bedouin that she has not committed the crime, she is nevertheless forced to leave the Bedouin's protection. Passing through the town she sees that a young man is about to be hanged for refusing to pay taxes. With the money she has received from the Bedouin, the woman pays the man's taxes and releases him. The young man follows his benefactor and attempts to seduce her. Again, the woman refuses. By this time, they are walking along a seashore where some ships are docked. The young man sells the woman as a disobedient slave to a merchant who forcibly places her on a ship as a slave. While the ship is sailing to an unknown destination the merchant decides to satisfy his sexual desire with the slave he has just purchased. The woman protests vehemently, attracting the crew of the ship who come to her rescue. But upon seeing her they all desire her and decide to have her, one at a time, thus threatening a gang rape.

What has been completely ignored in the traditional readings of Attar is the narrative's record of violent oppression, not only in relation to the woman's position in the medieval Islamic world, but in a symbolic order privileging the phallus. Let us start with the medieval Islamic position of the woman. What puts the plot in motion is the husband's decision to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca. The *Hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca, is a mandatory religious duty for all adult Muslims who are physically and financially capable of undertaking the journey at least once in their lifetime. Although the ritual of *Hajj* is equally incumbent on Muslim women and men, in the medieval period women were more easily excused for lacking the physical or financial capability of making the pilgrimage.[14] The travel records of medieval writers like Ibn Jubayr (d. 613/1217) and Ibn Battuta (d. 769/1368) often chronicle the difficulty and dangers of these long trips that, depending on where one started the journey, could take anywhere from three months to a year or in some cases even longer. It is also historically accurate that because of the length of the trip and the risks involved, men who undertook the *Hajj* often appointed another male adult either in their family or in their social circle to act as the

protector of their interests while they were away. In this system of values, the woman starts as a property of her husband. In Attar's narrative, the husband leaves his wife in care of a younger brother:

He asked him to attend to his wife,

And take care of his property.[15]

His wife (*ayalash*) and his property (*malash*) not only rhyme in the Persian verse; they are both also claimed by the husband through a possessive pronoun.

How can a woman who is reduced to property by law and custom resist her status as a sexual object? What discourse is available to her? Historically, women's most effective arguments against their own oppression come from religious discourse. Attar's protagonist also uses religious discourse as the first available means of defense.

Are you not ashamed before God? Do you thus show respect to thy brother?

Is this thy religion and thy probity? Do you thus keep trust for thy brother?

Go, repent, return to God, and eschew this wicked thought.[16]

But the narrative of *Ilahi-nama* shows us the futility of the woman's invocation of religious discourse. Not only is the man unconvinced, but he also turns the tables on the woman by using religious discourse against her. Afraid that the woman might tell her husband of his brother's attempted adultery, he bribes four men to testify against her. The judge convicts her of adultery and sentences her to death by stoning. Though the woman invokes religion as her discourse of resistance, the witnesses, the judge, and the executioners of religious discourse are men, and the woman has no means of redress.

By shining a light on the cruel and lopsided judgment on the woman, the narrative opens the door to the examination of woman's historical relationship with *shari'a* law, particularly around the

issue of stoning, which is still occurring in certain parts of the world today.[17] Given that the law requires four witnesses who have actually witnessed the adultery, meaning they have seen the couple in the act, the sentencing of the woman in the case of adultery is almost always based on a fabrication.[18]

However, Attar's narrative not only invites historical examination of woman's position in Attar's time (or at any time and place it is enacted as law and custom), it also puts forth a certain view of desire as phallic, which can be read as universal and ahistorical. The narrative of desire in which multiple men seek the woman as their object of sexual desire in a repetitious loop of displacement and deferment can also be read as a version of the psychoanalytic narrative. Men remain the subject of desire while woman becomes the object par excellence. Although according to Lacan men and women are equally trapped in the phallic structure of desire, in Irigaray's feminist reading of psychoanalytic discourse, in a system based on the phallus as the privileged signifier, woman is at a greater disadvantage.[19] Both masculine and feminine are decentered, fragmented positions articulated simultaneously in the symbolic order and in the system of sexual difference through an internal division and a rupture between the self and others. The desire that is produced as a result of this rupture is a desire for wholeness. The phallus represents that which is forever lost, and wholeness is a fantasy that is forever deferred. In this comedy of sexual relations, the male subject pursues the woman as the object of desire in his desperate search for completion. Likewise, the woman, masquerading as being the phallus, assumes the position of the object of male desire.

In Attar's narrative, as in the Lacanian/Irigarayan psychoanalytic discourse of desire, woman is trapped in a symbolic order that objectifies her to the point of non-existence. Even the name she is given at the beginning of the narrative suggests that. Marhuma means literally "one who receives mercy." In contemporary Persian, Marhuma also means "the deceased woman," echoing Lacan's

famous controversial maxim that "Woman does not exist."[20] Like Lacan's woman, Marhuma does not exist unless as an object of male desire in his fantasy of wholeness. Not only is she completely objectified, but her objectification results in violence. The woman starts as the property of her husband and ends as a slave in a ship of commodities. At the climax of the story she is on the verge of being raped by multiple men.[21] Here, we must pause to ask what the renunciation of desire could possibly mean in this context. One way of answering this question is to read the story as a narrative directed at men, asking them to see, to acknowledge, the destructive, absurd, and futile nature of their desire. Or as Zizek responds, "This gap that forever separates the lost Thing from symbolic semblances which are never 'that,' defines the contours of the ethics of desire: 'do not give way as to your desire' can only mean 'do not put up with any of the substitutes of the Thing, keep open the gap of desire.'" [22] The difference between Attar and Zizek or Lacan is that the former believes in the Thing, meaning that he believes in the possibility of a union with God, whereas Zizek and Lacan do not.

But even if we read man as addressee of the lessons of renunciation, the relationship of the woman to the discourse of desire and renunciation remains problematic. As the object of male desire, the woman has no choice. She not only cannot renounce the desire she does not have, she cannot escape the desire she does not want. Significantly, for both Attar and the psychoanalytic discourse, the only position possible for woman's desire (and escape from the phallic objectification) is the position of sainthood.

At the climax of the story, when the threat of a gang rape is imminent, the order of desire is suddenly disrupted by a singular aberrant event, a miracle. Seeing no hope for an ordinary deliverance, the woman finally turns to prayer:

If Thou will grant me death, Thou can, for death is better than such life.

Give me liberation or death today, for I cannot endure in this agony.

How long will Thou cause me to walk in blood?

Thou will find none more wretched than I.[23]

As she utters her last words of prayer, the woman loses consciousness, or as the literal translation of the Persian words indicate, she loses herself (*bi khishtan shod*). Her prayer causes the sea to burn the crew of the ship with its boiling water, turning all into ashes.

The transition from the old order of male desire (historical) to a new order (mythical/mystical) where woman can free herself from sexual objectification is marked by an extraordinary, unintelligible, and violent event. The death of the entire crew suggests the impossibility of imagining a new position for the woman in the old order (as things were). But it also envisions a hellish fantasy of punishment. An entire crew burns to ashes because of an attempted gang rape. It is important to note that the attempted rape scene and the burning of the crew to ashes did not appear in earlier versions of the story (before Attar's).[24] Rather than have the woman survive a terrible storm and a shipwreck (killing the crew), Attar chooses to highlight the violence directed at the woman as a slave and to make the punishment as palpable and as violent as the crime. Attar's version of the story also intensifies the link between the event as miracle and as trauma. The woman's prayers are answered. She is delivered from her ordeal through what seems to be a divine intervention. But her deliverance rests on two traumatic moments, the threat of gang rape and the burning of the crew. In fact, her resignification as a saint can only be understood as a response to trauma, the trauma of male desire and the trauma of encountering divinity within herself. Thus, the way to sainthood according to Attar's narrative is through destitution and trauma, a position fully embodied by a woman. One must suffer the oppression of this world, must be reduced to nothing, before one can find a way to God. From the Lacanian psychoanalytic point of view, the woman/saint

position points to "love beyond law," or "feminine jouissance."[25] In Zizek's words, the woman/saint "is no longer bothered by the other's desire as its decentered cause."[26] This "ecstatic surrender" is "inherently nonsensical, beyond meaning: meaning can only take place within the (symbolic) law."[27] The saint position is the feminine position precisely because it eludes the symbolic order and cannot be totalized.

Rising from the ashes of male desire, the woman is mythologized. But the threat of the old order of male desire still overshadows the new mythical/mystical world. The miracle (encounter with the divinity) by itself cannot break the cycle of male desire. While the woman is not looking for the guarantee of her existence in another's desire, the system of desire can still claim her as its object. The woman believes that her only salvation now lies in adopting a male disguise.

The woman cast those ashes overboard and made herself men's clothes.

In order to escape from the clutches of lovemaking,

To hold up her head like a man.[28]

Here the narrator of the *Ilahi-nama* goes back to his original construction of his protagonist as a "manly" woman. "But a woman who walks manly on the path is a complete stranger to such lust." It seems that only a woman masquerading as a man can ensure her borrowed subjectivity. But as we shall see masquerading is only a temporary step in Attar's fantasy of woman sainthood.

Finally, the woman disguised as a man reaches the shore. The fact that she/he is alone on the ship full of merchandise (conveniently supplied by the plot) entices everyone's curiosity. But she/he is only willing to answer to the king of the region. When the king finally comes, the woman masquerading as a man tells her story as a young man who was about to be gang raped on the ship. Except for the gender identity, the story is a close version of what happened. The woman/man even shows the king a charcoaled finger as evidence. She/he is ready to turn all the merchandise over to

the king in exchange for a place where she/he can worship God all the time without outside interference. Here the new woman completely transforms the relationship between her gender identity and property as the initial rhyming of *ayalash* (his wife) and *malash* (his property) suggested. Not only is she no longer anybody's property, but she also changes men's rules of business from a purely material transaction to a spiritual act. She surrenders all the property in her possession in exchange for a place of worship.[29]

At this point, it seems that the woman has finally escaped the economy of male desire. The king has agreed to her wishes and she can live in her sanctuary without further trouble. Why doesn't Attar's narrative end here? First, the elsewhere of woman's place on the fringes of the masculinist economy of desire is created at the expense of a lie, a masquerade. For the woman to truly claim that elsewhere, she must stop masquerading. But more importantly, creating a spiritual space for the woman so that she can take herself out of the economy of male desire does not seem to be the final objective of the narrative. Rather, the aim is to reorient the economy of desire to see the woman as the Other (substituting for God, Truth, or the Thing itself). Thus, the woman's sainthood is not celebrated as an individual achievement divorced from the socio-symbolic order but integral to it. In the second half of the narrative, the woman (as the divine agent) can finally contain and subdue male desire through her divinity.

Soon after woman/man retires to her sanctuary, the king falls sick and in his death bed names the woman (whom he thinks of as a young man devoted to God) as his successor. The ministers go to the young man/woman and inform him/her of the king's final wishes. The woman, who has no desire for becoming a ruler, devises a plan to reveal her identity as a woman. He/she asks the ministers to send him/her a hundred maidens in the company of their mothers so that he/she can choose a wife before assuming his place as a king. When the maidens and their mothers finally

come, the woman reveals her true gender and asks them to return to the court and tell their husbands and fathers the truth. The ministers and courtiers, who are somehow bound to the king's final wish, submit to the woman's authority even in the face of learning about her true gender identity.

Since you are the heir apparent,

Set someone over us as king or else rule like a man.[30]

However, the woman is not interested in "ruling like a man." She rejects the male power play with the same resolve as she rejects the phallic game of desire. She appoints someone trusted by all to rule the kingdom and remains in her sanctuary, her place of worship.

At this point in the story the woman becomes a celebrated healer. Her reputation for "someone whose prayers are answered" grows outside her immediate environment. People come from far away to see a woman healer who can pray for them and heal their wounds. In the last part of the narrative, all the male characters of the story who have had a role in the woman's fate finally come to find her. The brother-in-law, the Bedouin's slave, and the young man of the gallows have all suffered physical deformations (signifying psychological and spiritual deformations) because of what they have done to the woman. Thus, the woman's husband, returning from the *Hajj*, takes his brother to seek the celebrated woman saint with miraculous powers, and on his way is joined by the Bedouin Arab, his slave, and the young man of the gallows.

The narrator of the *Ilahi-nama* stages this final encounter between the woman and the men who abused her to complete the cycle of desire in its final reorientation. The woman's miraculous powers are to some extent demystified here, for the healing of the men is achieved through the woman's prior knowledge of their secrets. The woman, who has covered her face and identity behind a veil, tells each one of the three suffering men that their only cure lies in confessing their sins. One by one, she gets confessions from them before she prays for their recovery. On the one

hand, the confessions function as testimonies of witnesses for the husband, who still does not know the real story. On the other hand, the confessions can be read as psychoanalytic sessions. The cure for the men lies not only in assuming their full responsibility for their horrible deeds, but also in re-orienting their desire and sublimating it. Instead of desiring the woman as sexual object they can now elevate the woman to the position of divinity. Thus, as Zizek observes, "they can remain faithful to one's desire without getting drawn into the deadly vortex of the Thing."[31] Moreover, the confessions necessitate forgiveness. The husband forgives his brother; the Bedouin forgives his slave; and more importantly, the woman forgives all who committed acts of violence against her. Forgiveness acts as the catalyst for change, for an order based on compassion rather than oppression. It is also a stark contrast to the punishment suffered by the crew of the ship or the abuses suffered by the woman. We are faced with a different reality, a different narrative of a spiritual utopia, where desire is no longer wreaking havoc, where there is no resentment and retribution, where love conquers all.

What happens to the woman at the end of the narrative, after she forgives the men and reveals her identity to her husband, is also a significant aspect of the vision of the elsewhere created by Attar in his narrative of the *Ilahi-nama*. The woman does not return to her husband's house. Now that she has completely broken the connection between *ayalash* (his wife) and *malash* (his property), she no longer belongs to her husband. She is as a divine woman leading a community of believers. So, she makes her husband king and gives the Bedouin Arab the position of a vizier, and returns to her spiritual abode, her place of worship.

This final act completes the woman's resignification as the Other/mystic. Her spiritual journey ends seemingly on a high note. She has been given autonomy and authority through the Divine, and she has led men out of the shadow of their desires. Nevertheless, the great rupture

between the historical woman and the woman saint is never completely overcome. At the end the woman cannot wipe out all traces of her history. The spiritual woman and the historical woman are forever enmeshed. Un-entangling one from the other is not possible, and Attar's narrative has made that clear at every turn.

The standard interpretation of the woman's journey as "a narrative of renunciation" erases woman's history, woman's reality, to appropriate the woman once again as a trope in a seemingly universal story about a universal experience of spiritual renunciation. Consider for example, how many women have found themselves as displaced commodities in the absence of their husbands and fathers? How many have been accused of sexual misconduct and been stoned? How many have been sold into bondage? How many have been raped (or gang raped)? This erasure and denial is especially problematic if we also consider how emphatically the plot revolves around the woman's experiences of violence and abuse.

Attar's mystical, mythical tale is indeed a testament to the utmost difficulty (at times bordering on impossibility) of a woman's spiritual path starting inevitably as the object of the man's desire, sanctioned by law and custom. Unlike his contemporaries and many of his successors, Attar chooses to acknowledge this difficulty and to realize a woman's spiritual journey, against all odds, as a fantastic, strange tale. The result, as in the case of Attar's inclusion of Rabi'a al-Adawiyya in his *Tazkirat al-awliya* discussed in chapter three is an ambivalent narrative, on the one hand celebrating woman's presence and perseverance in the discourse and practice of Sufism, and on the other hand, making their presence such an exception (against unimaginable odds) that would render them an anomaly. But in this process Attar also defines sainthood as a feminine undertaking, though possible only through destitution. Destitution cannot be willed by anyone but is rather imposed by circumstances. Like the woman in Attar's narrative, the mystic is subjected to an oppression that

would reduce her to nothing and then give her a new existence through God. And here lies the biggest paradox of Attar's narrative. Attar's critique of oppression (here identified as male desire) is sharp and unforgiving, but the plot makes it also impossible to imagine the state of sainthood without that violent oppression. This necessity poses the greatest challenge to the readers of Attar and the discourse of Sufism in the twenty-first century. How can readers as Sufi practitioners condemn oppression in all its manifestations while submitting to it as a way of experiencing nothingness and breaking through the cycle of violence?

Section 2: Reading against the Grain

Sensible Transcendental in Rumi's *Masnavi*

While Jalaluddin Rumi Balkhi (d. 672/1273), the renowned thirteenth-century mystic, poet, and Sufi master has always been recognized as one of the most celebrated Sufi poets in Persian literature, over the last couple of decades accessible and attractive translations of Rumi's poetry in English and other languages have accorded Rumi an exalted place in the canon of world literature and have made him a familiar name far beyond Iran.

Rumi was born in Balkh (present-day Afghanistan). His father, Baha ud-Din Walad who was a theologian sympathetic to Sufi teachings, moved his family and a group of his disciples westward, first to Baghdad and Hejaz, gradually settling in central Anatolia and from there finding a permanent home in Konya. At a young age, Rumi inherited his father's *Madrassa* (religious school) and assumed the role of a religious teacher/scholar. Although in following his father's footsteps Rumi had inclinations towards Sufi teachings and practices, his spiritual transformation did not take place until he encountered his Sufi master Shams-e Tabrizi. The impact of the encounter was so profound

that he abandoned his teachings and devoted himself wholeheartedly to his master and the spiritual path.

Rumi has left three major works. *Diwan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, named in honor of Rumi's master Shams-e Tabrizi, is a collection of his ghazals, couplets, and quatrains, mostly composed as expressions of various states of his spiritual journey. *Fihi Ma Fihi* (In it What's in it, known in English as *Discourses of Rumi*) is a record of talks and lectures by Rumi compiled from the notes of his various disciples. However, Rumi's major work, which has been used for centuries not only as a reference to Rumi's teachings and his spiritual viewpoints but also as a didactic manual on Sufism, is *Masnaviye Ma'navi*, a six-volume poetic work containing numerous narratives and stories.

Persian-speaking people commonly refer to Rumi's *Masnavi* as "the Qur'an in the Persian tongue." Rumi's *Masnavi* is a book of stories and parables composed of 26,000 verses. The name *masnavi* is simply the name of the rhyming couplet verse form that by the time of Rumi had become popular in Persian poetry for composing narrative and didactic poems. However, unlike most examples of mystical *masnavi*s, Rumi's *Masnavi* does not have a framing narrative and hence lacks a cohesive structure. As many Rumi scholars have pointed out, this distinct characteristic of Rumi's *Masnavi* also resembles the composition and production of the Qur'an. Like the Prophet Mohammad, who is said to have recited aloud divine revelation in piecemeal fashion, Rumi recited the *Masnavi* orally when he felt inspired to do so. In both instances, the companions who were present at such occasions would write down the recitations.

Rumi composed his *Masnavi* towards the end of his life when he was already an experienced Sufi. His friend and deputy Hosamoddin Chalabi asked Rumi to compose a *masnavi* for the benefit of Sufis. Through popular stories, parables, and interpretations of Qur'anic verses, Rumi maps out the Sufi path and explains such Sufi concepts as love, ego, spiritual guidance, and spiritual Truth.

Since its composition in the seventh/thirteenth century, Rumi's *Masnavi* has occupied a special place in the canon of Sufism. In Sufi lodges across the Persian-speaking world the *Masnavi* has been read and recited as a primary source for understanding and practicing Sufism. Although no Sufi dares to openly claim that Rumi's *Masnavi* is as infallible and sacred as the Qur'an, there is a great resistance in the Sufi community (and even in the general readership of the *Masnavi* in the Persian- speaking world) to interpreting the *Masnavi* as simply a textual construct. Rather, it is generally believed that Rumi's explication of parables, stories, hadith, and Qur'anic verses that are dispersed throughout the *Masnavi* already illuminate the way the *Masnavi* should be read and interpreted.

Subsection 1: How to Challenge an Androcentric View?

Although many scholars of Sufism view Rumi as the apparent heir to Attar's mystical oeuvre, the two poets differ greatly in their representation of women. While in *Ilahi-nama* and *Tazkirat al-awliya* Attar goes against the Sufi scholarly tradition of either excluding women or representing them as lesser beings, Rumi for the most part paints women in his major work of narrative verse, the *Masnavi*, with the misogynistic brush he inherits from the medieval, Islamic, and Sufi traditions.

For many students of Rumi's *Masnavi* (especially women), it is hard to come to terms with his rather unflattering, harsh views on women. Women in the *Masnavi* are often portrayed as the worst stereotypes of their time. They represent the base, at times bestial tendencies of the ego. They seduce, betray, and manipulate men who are the main seekers in the spiritual journey. Scholars of Rumi have pointed out that Rumi's androcentric worldview must be read within the medieval Persian/Islamic cultural context. Fatemeh Keshavarz, for instance, argues that if one were to

compare the gender views of medieval Sufi mystics like Rumi to those of medieval Christian theologians like Thomas Aquinas, one would notice no significant differences between them, for the dominant medieval worldview in both the Islamic and the Christian world was similarly androcentric and patriarchal.[32]

However, as we have already discussed in the case of Attar, one can always find mystics (pre-medieval, medieval, or modern) who in their works defy the dominant norms regarding gender and sexuality and present alternative egalitarian paradigms. Secondly, as feminist medieval scholars of many traditions have shown, exposing the unequal and at times misogynist construction of gender and its history in literary and religious/spiritual texts of the period is an important feminist work. Finally, what needs to be done is not just to acknowledge that a certain text, especially a text that is considered sacred in a given tradition, sponsors androcentric or even misogynist views. Rather, feminist scholarship has shown us various re-reading strategies for reclaiming the hidden, censored, and at times tormented female body and speaking from her point of view.

It is this third purpose that I propose to undertake here. The challenge in a feminist re-reading of the *Masnavi*, however, is how to oppose the androcentric views of Rumi's *Masnavi* without alienating a wide readership who regard the *Masnavi* as a sacred text. This is perhaps one of the reasons why scholars of Rumi have generally shied away from engaging with issues of gender and sexuality in his work and instead limited their comments to noting the overall medieval androcentric worldview that informed his work. For if one were to focus on the overwhelmingly negative representation of women as embodiments of the evils of the carnal soul and animal self that populate the pages of the *Masnavi*, one would end up discrediting Rumi as a misogynist mystic. On the other hand, ignoring the *Masnavi* would be ignoring a classical work, not only with aesthetic qualities we value in any great literature, but also with profound insight into the Sufi path and its contours. The

strategy I propose and use in my feminist re-reading of *Masnavi* is to identify a narrative of gender that not only contains its own critique but also provides a space for the articulation of feminine voice and agency. In other words, instead of focusing on numerous examples of damning representations of women in the *Masnavi*, I choose to focus on a particular representation of woman that problematizes women's relation to Truth and spiritual fulfillment. By drawing attention to the complexity of Rumi's well-known parable of the Bedouin and his wife in the first volume of *Masnavi*, I hope to demonstrate that Rumi's *Masnavi* can still be used as an important source of knowledge for understanding and addressing the problematic foundation of the relationship between spirituality and gender in Sufi discourses.

In my reading of Rumi's parable of the Bedouin and his wife, I draw on the work of the French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray and especially her concept of "sensible-transcendental." Irigaray has argued that man is privileged at woman's expense. In her formulation, the present symbolic order does not allow the existence of sexual difference. There is only one sex, the male sex, and the other (the feminine) is defined according to the male standard. As imagined by Irigaray, "sexual difference" is not an essential nature but a philosophical "trace" signifying the face of the other. The trace remains invisible as long as it is suppressed by the male standard of subjectivity.

Over the years Irigaray has followed this trace of sexual difference in many cultural and theoretical sites: philosophical writings, mythologies, psychoanalysis, and religion. The question of women's subjectivity and its erasure/suppression by the phallogocentric economy is the thread that runs through her works and binds them together. Irigaray's turn to religious subjectivity therefore is closely tied to this overarching project. In "Divine Women," Irigaray makes reference to the traditional four elements familiar from pre-Socratic thought (air, earth, fire, and water) and points to the culture's refusal "to think about the material conditions of existence" as a sign of its failure to

acknowledge its vital relationship with the maternal body.[33] In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray coins the term "sensible transcendental" not only to once again contest the gendered binary opposition between sensible (material or what is knowable by the senses) and transcendental, but also to envision an alternative relation with the divine.[34] According to Irigaray, this binary systematically associates woman/the feminine with certain things (nature, darkness, the home, the body, the earth) and man/the masculine with certain other things (spirit, form, intellect, the sky). Irigaray posits "sensible transcendental" as a conceptual tool to subvert the dualism by noting the dependence of the primary term on the repression of the secondary term: in this case, the sensible becomes prioritized. With this move Irigaray reassigns the divine and the religious subject to both an abstract and an embodied realm.

Although Irigaray uses the concept of "sensible transcendental" as a way of critiquing the suppression of the feminine in the metaphysical tradition, as exemplified in the works of philosophers such as Plato, Martin Heidegger, and Emmanuel Levinas, her theory has a much wider implication for religious and spiritual discourses. Already in "Divine Women," Irigaray raises the question of women's divinity (women's relationship to the divine) in a symbolic order that conceptualizes "God" as a masculine projection of an ideal that guarantees masculine gender.[35] However, Irigaray also recognizes the importance of an ideal toward which our becoming is directed and by which our ethics is governed. "Sensible transcendental" is an attempt at articulating such an ideal horizon that acknowledges sexual difference rather than suppresses it.[36] As such, "sensible transcendental" becomes a utopian feminist concept for re-evaluating religious practices and theologies. It asks us not only to uncover the debt owed to the material/maternal body as the foundational ground for any transcendence, but also to re-imagine divinity as a horizon of divine ideals (masculine and feminine) that is yet to be realized. Using Irigaray's "sensible transcendental"

as a conceptual tool I want to turn to Rumi's parable of the Bedouin and his wife and through a close textual reading speculate on possibilities that arise from such an application.

Like many stories in *Masnavi*, the parable of the Bedouin and his wife is a recycled story. Badi al-Zaman Fruzanfar documents versions of this story according to three sources: Attar's *Musibatname*, Muhammad Owfi's *Javame al-hekayat*, and finally Ahmad Sam'ani's *Rawh al-arwah.*[37] Significantly, in all the older versions of this story the Bedouin acts alone, and there is no mention of a wife. The Bedouin simply is driven to the court of Mamun the caliph out of extreme poverty due to the famine ravishing the land. On his way to the court he comes across a water hole containing sweet water. The Bedouin, who had never tasted sweet water before, decides to put some of the water in his goatskin water container (*mashk*) and take it to the caliph as a gift, hoping to receive some reward in return. In all the older versions of the story, the emphasis is on the caliph's generosity. The caliph rewards the Bedouin with gold and sends him back to the desert.

In Rumi's *Masnavi*, however, recycled stories are often retold with new twists that at times completely reorient the parable and open new possibilities of meaning. His version of the parable starts with the description of the caliph's generosity:

> In former days there was a caliph who made Hatim the slave of his liberality.
>
> He had raised high the banner of munificence and largesse,
>
> He had removed poverty and want from the world.[38]

But after eight lines on the caliph's generosity Rumi starts the story of the Bedouin and his wife without establishing a relationship between the caliph and the Bedouin. Consequently, the long exchanges between the Bedouin and his wife that constitute most of the parable change the once obvious moral of the parable regarding the king's generosity to a more complicated parable that

revolves around poverty, contentment, ego (*nafs*), reason (*aghl*), and in short, the seeking of the Truth.

What is more, in this retelling of an old parable, sexual difference and its relationship to one's physical and spiritual fulfillment, which was before completely suppressed, now becomes fully foregrounded. In other words, whereas in the old versions of the parable, the absence of any female characters made the quest for the ruler's generosity a male undertaking, in Rumi's parable the long debate between the husband and wife about their poverty and whether or not they should seek any remedy, places sexual difference at the center of the parable and opens it up to interpretations concerning the role of gender in the quest for Truth and the gendering of Sufi concepts like *nafs* (ego) and *aghl* (reason).

Consistent with the parable tradition, Rumi's parables often explicitly state the moral lesson of the story at the end. It is my intention, however, to show the rupture/disjunction between the story and its explicit moral. Thus, I start with the exchanges between the wife and her husband and gradually make my way to Rumi's concluding remarks. Also, the story of the Bedouin and his wife, like all long parables in *Masnavi*, is told through frequent digressions. Except for my discussion of Rumi's interpretation of his own narrative, I will focus on the parable itself, reading it as a continuous narrative.

Subsection 2: The Debate between the Sensible and the Transcendental

At the beginning, the woman and the man, the wife and the husband, are polarized in the debate over poverty and contentment. The wife complains about their material poverty and the husband calls her to patience and contentment. What is remarkable in these early exchanges is that the woman paints a

very realistic picture of the everyday life of poverty and its damning social consequences. Not only is she suffering physically from poverty, but she is also socially affected.

Kinsfolk and strangers have come to flee from us in like fashion as Samiri from men.

If I beg a handful of lentils from someone, he says to me, "Be silent, O death and plague!" [39]

Moreover, she is keenly aware of the way poverty undermines her human values. She can neither be charitable or hospitable, although both are values she clearly upholds.

What gifts can we make? We are continually in beggary,

We are slitting the vein of the gnat in the air.

If any guest arrives, I will go for his tattered cloak

When he falls asleep at night.[40]

There is nothing unreasonable about the woman's wish to change her oppressive material circumstance. In commentaries on this story many critics and readers of the *Masnavi* have pointed to Rumi's skills in depicting social realities as a way of enhancing the effect of the story.[41] But the more important question is what will happen to Rumi's concluding moral of the story when the wife's condition of poverty is portrayed so realistically, and her concerns and wishes are painted as genuine and reasonable.

The husband's responses are equally revealing.

How long wilt thou seek income and seed-produce? What indeed is left of our life? Most of it is past.

The sensible man does not look at increase or deficiency, because both these

will pass by like a torrent.[42]

In comparison with the wife's discourse, concise and reasonable, the Bedouin's response is elaborate, abstract, scattered, and not quite as convincing. Here are some of his arguments. Life is

transient; death is unavoidable. All animals depend on God for their daily sustenance. Pain and suffering are messengers of death. The worshippers of the body have no access to the soul. When you were younger you were more content; you have regressed as you've grown older. A couple should be in agreement like a pair of shoes. Since my goal is contentment, why is your goal repulsiveness?

The woman's arguments are based on lived experiences. The man's response on the other hand, is mostly philosophical and abstract. It dwells on the nature of life and death, the comparison between animal life and human life, the relation between body and soul, all of which are debatable and susceptible to criticism. Moreover, his argument that the wife was more content when she was younger can only backfire as a testimony to the wife's lifelong experience of poverty and her patience and endurance in this regard. Finally, the man's last analogy of a married couple as a pair of shoes with precise characteristics can be read as his denial of sexual difference and his insistence on sameness.

It is no wonder that the woman feels angry and agitated upon hearing her husband's response; the husband completely ignores his wife's lived experiences and instead lectures her with abstractions and analogies that do not speak to her immediate palpable concerns. The binary positions of husband and wife on two sides of poverty and contentment suggest a polarization on two sides of knowledge: knowledge through lived experience, or what I call "sensible knowledge," and knowledge through abstract ideas of truth, or what I call "transcendental knowledge." At this point in the story it seems that the two camps of knowledge have nothing to do with each other, or worse, one can only prove itself through rejection of the other. But the wife's heated response is also a refusal to accept such absolute polarization.

In the woman's view of life, the outer world and the inner world, the words and the actions, the "sensible" and the "transcendental" must inform one another. That is why the wife exposes her husband as an imposter, as someone who claims contentment without actually achieving it as a spiritual state. For she sees a huge discrepancy between the man's words and his actions, between the way he lives and what he preaches:

> The wife cried out at him, saying: 'O thou who makest reputation thy religion, I will not swallow thy spells any more.
>
> Don't talk nonsense in thy presumption and pretension: begone, don't speak from pride and arrogance.
>
> How long wilt thou utter pompous and artificial phrases? Look at thine own acts and feelings and be ashamed!
>
> …
>
> When has thou illumined thy soul by contentment? Of contentment thou has learned only the name.[43]

In her response, the woman also refuses to submit to the traditional dichotomy that places reason and understanding (*aghl*) on the side of male transcendental knowledge and assumes that woman lacks in this respect.

> Thou has deemed thy understanding superior to mine, but how has thou truly
> seen me, who am deficient in understanding?
>
> Don't spring upon me like a reckless wolf! Oh, better be without understanding than suffer the disgrace of having thy understanding.
>
> Since thy understanding is a shackle for mankind, it is not understanding: it is a snake and scorpion.[44]

The woman is also keenly aware of the power dynamics inherent in the primacy of "transcendental knowledge" in the name of God and religious truth. Thus, she sees her husband's use of "transcendental knowledge" as a snare, an entrapment to control others and stop all questioning.

> Thou beguilest me with the name of God in order that thou mayst expose me to shame and confusion.
>
> The name of God enthralled me, not thy contrivance: thou madest the
>
> name of God a trap: woe to thee!
>
> The name of God will take vengeance from thee on my behalf: I commit my soul and body to the name of God.[45]

Without rejecting "transcendental knowledge" or the possibility of "contentment" as a spiritual state, the woman rejects her husband's use of this seemingly spiritual discourse as a way of denying her sensible knowledge of poverty and her desire to change the material condition of her life.

But the woman's accusations of fraud and abuse of religious discourse only strengthens her husband's resolve to defend poverty and stand by his religious convictions. Although this time his response is more coherent, he continues to use analogies that obscure rather than clarify his arguments.

> Wealth and gold are a cap to the head: 'tis the bald man that makes a shelter of his cap,
>
> But he that has curly and beautiful locks is happier when his cap is gone.[46]

But he also lays the blame for this failure of communication on the woman and her inability to understand him.

> The affair of spiritual poverty is beyond thy comprehension; do not look on poverty with contempt.[47]
>
> …

> Oh, alas, would that thou hadst comprehension, so that the unfolded tale of my heart might be shown forth to thee from my soul.[48]

Unable to persuade his wife of the values of poverty and contentment, the husband's final response is to threaten to leave her.

> If thou keep silence, 'tis well, and if not, I will so do that at this very moment I will leave my house and home.[49]

The severity of this threat is evident in the wife's emotional breakdown and her complete submission to her husband's will.

> When the wife saw that he was fierce and unmanageable, she began to weep: tears in sooth are a woman's lure.
>
> …
>
> "I am thy dust," said she, "not worthy to be thy lady-wife.
>
> Body and soul and all I am is thine; the entire authority and command belongs to thee.[50]

The argument over the acceptance or refusal of poverty finally turns into a struggle for power and submission. The woman is at a disadvantage. She depends on her husband for survival. She needs to persuade her husband to seek material wealth because as a woman she cannot leave the confines of her home. It is only through her husband that she can hope to improve the material condition of her life. However, if her husband leaves her, her material condition will deteriorate even further. No wonder the woman shows such a severe reaction to her husband's threat. She weeps and submits because she has no other recourse.

It is only through this weeping that the Bedouin finally submits to his wife's wishes. Now that he has proven his power over her, he can be moved by her tears and remember his love.

When the tears and sobs passed beyond bounds—from her who was fascinating even without tears—

There appeared from that rain a lightning-flash that shot a spark of fire into the heart of the lonely man.

She by whose beauteous face man was enslaved, how will it be when she begins to play the humble slave?[51]

From here on the woman becomes the beloved who holds her lover/husband captive. It is she who holds the power in this relationship.

Inasmuch as He created her, the woman, that he, Adam, might take comfort in her, how can Adam be parted from Eve?

Though he be Rustam son of Zal and greater than Hamza in valour, as regards authority he is his old woman's captive.

The Prophet, to whose words the whole world was enslaved, used to cry,

"Speak to me, O Humayrai!" [52]

As evident in the above lines, Rumi uses the exchanges between the Bedouin and his wife to make general claims about the relationship between women and men. He invokes male archetypes from Adam to Rustam and Hamza and finally to the Prophet to show that man's submission to his wife is an essential law of nature regardless of the power and authority of the husband. He yields to her because he desires her; he desires her because God has created her to comfort him and fulfill his desire.

But Rumi takes this archaic definition of sexual difference a step further in his next brief digression.

The Prophet said that woman prevails exceedingly over the wise and intelligent,

> While, on the other hand, ignorant men prevail over woman,
> For in them the fierceness of the animal is imprisoned.
> They lack tenderness, kindness and affection, because animal ego predominates over their human nature.
> Love and tenderness are human qualities, anger and lust are animal qualities.
> She is a ray of God, she is not that earthly beloved: she is creator, you might say she is not created. [53]

The first thing that happens here is that the man's submission to woman is qualified as a sign of wisdom and intelligence. Second, woman is elevated to the position of God, the creator. Thus, a debate that started as a highly polarized and gendered discourse between overcoming material poverty or coming to terms with poverty through contentment, between "sensible knowledge" and "transcendental knowledge," approaches murky areas of overlapping boundaries and merging interests. If to submit to woman, man must be intelligent and wise, wisdom and intelligence, emblems of transcendental knowledge, are as much on the side of the woman as they are on the side of the man. On the other hand, if "tenderness, kindness and affection," the traditional feminine traits associated with sensible knowledge, are qualities that wise and intelligent men possess, then women and men are not as divided as one might think. Finally, if woman is a Godlike creator, her concerns can no longer be dismissed as trivial, for they are not outside the realm of transcendental knowledge, but within it.

Subsection 3: Rumi's Moral Lesson

As soon as the Bedouin submits to his wife and promises to listen to her and follow her advice, Rumi the storyteller falls into a long digression jumping from one thread to another. When he finally returns to the parable of the Bedouin and his wife he finds it necessary to explicitly state the moral of his parable even though he is still in the midst of telling it.

> The altercation of the man and wife has been related as a story:
>
> know that it is a parable of your own flesh (*nafs*) and reason.
>
> This man and wife, which are the flesh and the reason,
>
> are very necessary for the manifestation of good and evil;
>
> …
>
> Like the wife, the flesh, in order to contrive the means of gratifying its desires,
>
> is at one time seeking humility and at another time to domination.
>
> The reason is really unconscious of these worldly thoughts: in its mind is nothing but love of God.[54]

Rumi's explication of the parable is based on older traditions of Sufi discourses that equate spiritual values to what is masculine and conversely explain what is spiritually devalued through the feminine. Thus reason (*aghl*) is associated with the masculine while base ego or body (*nafs*) is associated with the feminine. There is nothing original about Rumi's moral lesson. However, it is Rumi's subversive narrative, I argue, that undermines the traditional formulaic interpretation and opens the parable to new possibilities of meaning. On the surface, it seems that Rumi's parable premises itself on the traditional dichotomy between the devalued sensible associated with the

feminine and the overvalued transcendental associated with the masculine. Thus the woman represents the body and material needs while the man represents the mind and spiritual aspiration. But as I argued in my reading of the parable, in the debate between the husband and wife, the woman's concerns based on her lived experience are as legitimate, if not more so, as the man's abstract unintelligible analogies. Moreover, the woman challenges her husband's use of transcendental knowledge as a way of silencing her and denying her sensible knowledge of poverty. Furthermore, in her responses the woman refuses to accept the traditional binary between the sensible and the transcendental and insists on viewing the reciprocity of the two. Finally, not only does the debate end with man's submission to woman as the signifier of transcendental, it is the woman's initiative and advice that enable the man to seek the benefit of the caliph's generosity. It is the woman who at the end advises her husband to take a jug of rainwater to the caliph in order to win his favor and attract his generosity. In other words, without the woman's initial complaints, her perseverance and her advice, the man would not have sought the company of the caliph and would not have benefited from his material/spiritual generosity.

Thus, in my reading of the parable the sensible is not that which one transcends in order to achieve spiritual fulfillment, but rather the means through which transcendence is achieved. By representing the interdependency of the sensible and transcendental, Rumi's parable in fact anticipates Irigaray's "sensible transcendental" as a viable utopian vision. Although the question of woman's access to spiritual fulfillment still remains unexplored in this early configuration, the strong presence of woman's agency and voice already signifies an alternative view to the hierarchical and rigid binaries that sacrifice the feminine sensible to the masculine transcendental.

Section 3: Conclusion

In the two classical Sufi narratives I have discussed in this chapter, the woman's presence is central to the plot of the story and key to Sufi teachings. In Attar's narrative, the woman starts as both the object of man's desire and an exemplar for achieving subjectivity through refusing that objectification. By fashioning an old Hebrew folktale into an Islamic tale and placing it at the very beginning of his discussion of desire and renunciation, Attar in effect disrupts the discourse of renunciation as a gender-neutral discourse and raises important questions about woman's relation to the discourse of renunciation and sainthood. Similarly, in the case of Rumi's parable, the woman takes such a significant role in defending the "sensible" material necessity and persuading her husband to pursue the king's favor that she ends up challenging Rumi's interpretation, which places the "transcendental" above the "sensible" and identifies the woman as the animal ego or the body (*nafs*) in opposition to knowledge and Truth.

What these readings achieve is not only to counter the masculinist design of the interpretive community (in the case of Attar) or the author (in Rumi's case), but also to make these classical texts relevant to the experience of contemporary Sufi readers (women and men) who read these stories for inspiration and guidance. As we will see in the ethnography chapter of this dissertation, the question of gender is still a problematic issue in the Sufi communities around the world where the transition from a pre-modern worldview of Sufism to twenty-first century versions of Sufi practices and ethics are being formulated. The re-readings of the classical texts, with attention to the questions of gender, race, class, and sexuality, can precipitate and help this transition.

[1] *Masnavi* is simply the name of the rhyming couplet verse form popularized in Persian poetry for composing narrative and didactic poems.
[2] Ghazal is a lyric poem with a fixed number of verses and a repeated rhyme, each line sharing the same meter. Because ghazals are typically on the theme of love, they became the preferred form of poetic expressions for Sufi poets like Rumi, Araghi, and Sufi sympathizers like Sa'di and Hafez.
[3] Scholars of classical Persian literature attest to the fact that Sufi concepts, imagery, and terminology seep into the texture of Persian literature in a way that separating Sufi from non-Sufi literature becomes problematic. For the purposes of this paper, I define Sufi literature as literature produced by writers and poets who identified themselves as Sufi disciples, Sufi aspirants, or Sufi masters.
[4] Here I'm strictly speaking of gender analysis of Sufi literature. However, it is important to note that in recent decades, the number of critical works in Persian literature that employ gender as a category of analysis have gradually increased. Farzaneh Milani's *Veils and Words* (1992) and *Words not Sword* (2011), Kamran Talattof's *Nizami's Unlikely Heroines* (2000), and Alyssa Gabbay's comparative study of gender in the works of Ferdowsi, Nezami, and Amir Khusraw (2009), are a few examples.
[5] Annette Kolodny, "Dancing through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," *Feminist Studies* vol. 6, no. 1 (Spring 1980), 17.
[6] Safoura Nourbakhsh, "Sexual Difference and Spiritual Knowledge: A Feminist Reading of Rumi's Masnavi," *The International Conference on Rumi*, University of Maryland, Fall 2007. Also, Safoura Nourbakhsh, "Till Death Do US Part: The Marriage of the Feminine Sensible to the Masculine Transcendental in Rumi's Masnavi," *Sufi*, no. 85 Summer 2013.
[7] For speculation about Attar's attachment to a Sufi order see Hermann Landolt's "Attar, Sufism and Ismailism," in *Attar and the Persian Sufi Tradition: The Art of Spiritual Flight*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn and Christopher Shackle (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).
[8] See John Andrew Boyle's introduction to his translation of *Ilahi-nama*. *The Ilahi-nama or Book of God*, trans. John Andrew Boyle (Manchester University Press, 1976), xx-xxi.
[9] *The Ilahi-nama or Book of God*, xiv.
[10] For the Persian edition of *Ilahi-nama*, see Farid ad-Din Attar *Ilahi-nama*, ed. Reza Shafi'i-Kadkani, (Tehran: Entesharate Sokhan, 1387/2008), 131. For the English edition, see Farid ad-Din Attar, *The Ilahi-nama or Book of God*, trans. John Andrew Boyle, 30-31. Here and elsewhere I have modified Boyle's translation.
[11] For discussions of various versions of the narrative see Heshmat Moayyad, "Sagozasht-e Zan-e Parsay-e Attar," in *Majalaye Iranshenasi*, vol IX, no. 3, 1997. According to Moayyad the oldest recorded version of the narrative is found in *al-Kafi*, written by one of the Shi'a *hadith* collectors, Muhammad ibn Ya'qub al-Kulayni (d. 941). You can find the English translation of the narrative in *Al-Kafi*, vol 5 of 8 (*Fru' al-Kafi*), trans. Muhammad Sarwar (The Islamic Seminary, 2013), 683.
https://www.scribd.com/document/251623607/AL-KAFI-VOLUME-5-English-pdf
[12] For a discussion of Attar's tale in relation to medieval European literature, see Franklin D. Lewis "One Chaste Muslim Maiden and a Persian in a Pear Tree: Analogues of Boccaccio and Chaucer in Four Earlier Arabic and Persian Tales," in *Metaphor and Imagery in Persian Poetry*, ed. by Ali Asghar Seyed-Gohrab (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 165-187.
[13] According to the medieval sources, African slaves were sold in the Arab world before and after Islam.
[14] Marina Tolmacheva, "Medieval Muslim Women's Travel: Defying Distance and Danger," *World History Connected*, June 2013. <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/10.2/forum_tolmacheva.html> (7 Sep. 2016).
[15] Attar, *Ilahi-nama*, Shafi'i-Kadkani,132; Attar *Ilahi-nama*, Boyle, 31.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Although stoning women for adultery is not a common practice in the twenty-first century, there are still sporadic cases of stoning reported in places where fundamentalist Islam has a stronghold. For an example see http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/04/asia/afghanistan-taliban-woman-stoning/
[18] It is also important to remember that a woman is recognized as half a man, according to the Islamic law still in effect in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia. Thus, for example, a man's testimony is equal to two women's testimony, a sister inherits half of that of her brother, and a woman's compensation in case of injury and death is even less than half of a man's.
[19] For Lacan's discussion of sexual subjectivity, see Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998). For Irigaray's critical response to Lacan, see Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[20] Jacques Lacan, "Seminar of 21 January 1975," in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1985), 167.
[21] The language of Attar is clear in describing a rape scene. Here is Boyle's translation:
Since every heart was filled with longing for her they all came to an agreement,
That they should suddenly seize that woman and satisfy their desires by force.
The key word in Persian, translated here as "by force," is *be ekrah*. In Islamic law (*feqh*) *be ekrah* or *ba ekrah* means forcing someone (against their will) to an act deemed immoral or against one's custom and religious beliefs.
[22] Slavoj Zizek, "From desire to drive: Why Lacan is not Lacaniano," *Atlantica de Las Artes* (14 Otono 1996). http://zizek.livejournal.com/2266.html
[23] Attar, *Ilahi-nama*, Shafi'i-Kadkani,137; Attar, *Ilahi-nama*, Boyle, 38.
[24] See note 11.
[25] In "God and the Jouissance of ~~The~~ Woman," Lacan establishes the jouissance of the woman as supplementary, which is therefore outside the realm of articulation and unknowable. "There is a jouissance proper to her, to this 'her' which does not exist and which signifies nothing, except that she experiences it—that much she does know." "God and the Jouissance of ~~The~~ Woman," which is Chapter 6 of *Encore* has been partly translated. Jacques Lacan, "God and the Jouissance of ~~the~~ Woman," in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, (New York: WW Norton & Company), 1985, 137-48.
[26] Slavoj Zizek, "Love Beyond Law," quoted from http://www.lacan.com/zizlola.htm , December 15, 2016.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Attar, *Ilahi-nama*, Kadkani,138. Attar *Ilahi-nama*, Boyle, 38.
[29] Significantly, this place of worship called *ma'bad* in Attar's text has no specific religious marker.
[30] Attar, *Ilahi-nama*, Kadkani, 140. Attar *Ilahi-nama*, Boyle, 40.
[31] Slavoj Zizek, "From desire to drive: Why Lacan is not Lacaniano," *Atlantica de Las Artes* 14 Otono 1996. http://zizek.livejournal.com/2266.html
[32] Keshavarz, "Pregnant with God," 93.
[33] Luce Irigaray, "Divine Women," *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. G. C. Gill. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 57-58.
[34] Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. C. Burke and G. C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 154.
[35] Irigaray, "Divine Women," 61.
[36] For an overview of Irigaray's conception of sexual difference, see Kathleen Lennon, "Feminist Perspectives on the Body," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta ed.URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/feminist-body/>.
For an overview of Irigarary's contribution to feminist religious discourse see Nancy Frankenberry, "Feminist Philosophy of Religion," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/feminist-religion/>.
[37] Badi al-Zaman Fruzanfar, *Ma'akhidh-i Qisas va Tamthilat-i Masnavi* (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1968), 243.
[38] For the Persian edition of the *Masnavi*, see Jalalludin Muhammad Balkhi, *Masnavi Ma'anavi* (Tehran: Entesharete Elmi, 1374/1995), 105. For the English edition, see Jalaluddin Rumi, *Masnavi* trans. Reynold A. Nicholson, (Norfolk: The Thetford Press, 1937), 122. (Here and elsewhere I have slightly modified Nicholson's translation). Hatem Ta'i was a pre-Islamic Arabian poet who was famous for his extreme generosity.
[39] *Masnavi Ma'anav*i,106; *Masnavi*, 123.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Abdul-Hossein Zarrinkub, *Serre Ney* (Tehran: Entesharate Elmi, 1385/2006), 267.
[42] *Masnavi Ma'anavi*,107; *Masnavi*, Nicholson 125.
[43] *Masnavi Ma'anavi*,108; *Masnavi*, Nicholson 126.
[44] *Masnavi Ma'anavi*,109; *Masnavi*, Nicholson 127.
[45] Ibid.
[46] *Masnavi Ma'anavi*,109; *Masnavi*, Nicholson 128.
[47] *Masnavi Ma'anavi*,110; *Masnavi*, Nicholson 129.
[48] *Masnavi Ma'anavi*,111; *Masnavi*, Nicholson 130.
[49] *Masnavi Ma'anavi*,112; *Masnavi*, Nicholson 130.
[50] Ibid.
[51] *Masnavi Ma'anavi*,113; *Masnavi*, Nicholson 132.
[52] *Masnavi Ma'anavi*,113; *Masnavi*, Nicholson 133.

[53] Ibid.
[54] *Masnavi Ma'anavi*,121; *Masnavi*, Nicholson 142-143.

Chapter 5: Nimatullahi Sufi Women: A Contemporary Ethnography

If we think of ethnography as the study of cultures, the examination of the historical writings and literature of Persian Sufism is already an ethnography of the culture of medieval Persian Sufism. However, instead of observing people (communities as well as individuals) in their everyday life and/or interviewing them (two distinct methodologies employed by ethnographers for gathering data), cultural historians and literature scholars oftentimes use the existing data of recorded culture, from visual material, to music, to travelogues, to press publications, and to oral and written stories. What ethnographers share with cultural historians and literature studies scholars focusing on culture, and in fact with other disciplinary studies of culture (sociology, psychology, linguistics), is the desire to interpret and analyze the data (in whatever form) as a coherent meaning system. For example, in her book *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, historian Afsaneh Najmabadi uses visual material (ranging from paintings to illustrations, photos, and cartoons), travelogues, diaries, letters, and published journalistic, political, and literary texts to draw a portrait of gender and sexuality mores in nineteenth-century Iran. Now, if we imagine that an ethnographer could access and do field work in nineteenth-century Iran, although she would gather her data differently (through interviewing and participant observation), she would still contextualize her data with reference to some of the same sources available to Najmabadi. Another example is in the field of literature: Helen Creese's book *Women of the Kakawin World: Marriage and Sexuality in the Indic Courts of Java and Bali*. Through delving into the contents of epic poetry called Kakawin, Creese constructs a portrait of women's lives within the royal courts and offers a rich and colorful glimpse of romance, sexuality, marriage, and ceremony within the Hindu courts of Java and Bali before the nineteenth century. It is in this sense, therefore, that I claim that

ethnography informs my entire dissertation.

However, as a distinct methodology for recording and analyzing lived experiences of people, ethnography can also make its unique contribution to the study of Sufi women in contemporary Persian Sufism. Applying feminist theories of gender and sexuality to the historical writings of medieval Persian Sufism and classical Persian literature, although illuminating normative discourses and concepts of Sufism as a complex gender construct, still leaves the question of women's lived experiences within the communities of Persian Sufism unanswered. As textual productions, medieval Sufi histories and literature are primarily authored by men. Unlike their medieval counterparts in Europe (Hildegard of Bingen, Hadewich of Antwerp, and Julian of Norwich), medieval Sufi women did not leave behind any writings.

Therefore, regardless of how much information we can gather and what conclusions we can infer from the textual material about women's past participation and contributions to Persian Sufism, we can do more than simply infer women's role in Persian Sufi communities by turning our attention to the present day. Today, women are an integral part of Persian Sufism. Moreover, the core concepts, symbols, narratives, and rituals of medieval Persian Sufism continue to inform present teachings of Sufism even as Persian Sufism travels from its origin in medieval Persian territory to different cultures and countries in Europe, the United States, Canada, Africa, Australia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. How these women from diverse cultural, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds view Persian Sufism, interpret its symbols, and participate in its rituals, can tell us something about the ways in which contemporary Sufi women are challenged by and pose challenges to the gender and sexual construction of the Sufi culture they adopt.

Nevertheless, conducting an ethnography of women in the Nimatullahi Sufi order by one of its privileged members poses its own challenges. As the daughter of the late master, Dr. Javad

Nurbakhsh, the sister of the present master, Alireza Nurbakhsh, and an active member of the Nimatullahi Sufi community, I have had the approval of my father and the trust of the larger community to interview members. As an insider who has lived practically all of her life in Sufi communities in Iran, England, and the United States, I also have my own memories, observations, and opinions about the construction of gender in the Sufi communities I am part of. Furthermore, my relationship with the women I have interviewed in this chapter goes beyond a typical researcher/subject relationship. I have known four of the six women I have interviewed for years. One of the interviewees is my mother, Parvaneh Daneshvar, with whom I had an extensive ten hours of interview, in an attempt to reconstruct her life and the lives of women she has known in the Sufi communities in Iran for the last sixty years. The question I had to grapple with for writing an ethnography of this kind was whether or not my identity as a privileged insider would in any way compromise this project.

Feminist epistemology and the reflexive turn in social sciences have already challenged the possibility of "objectivity" as the researcher's criterion in pursuit of knowledge. Most contemporary ethnographies draw attention to the ways in which the researchers themselves (either as insiders or as outsiders) affect the production of knowledge. My primary anxiety, therefore, as to whether my loyalty to my Sufi community would limit my capability as a researcher, was gradually lessened as I studied ethnographies and tried to conduct my first interviews. I learned from many feminist ethnographers, such as Erika Friedl (*The Women of Deh Koh*), Lila Abu-Lughod (*Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories*), and Saba Mahmood (*Politics of Piety*), that an outsider can have as much respect and understanding for a culture as someone from the community. However, I also believe that there are advantages—as well as challenges—as an insider, and tested this with the experience of interviewing my own mother.

I found that in spite of my anxieties for being too close to my subject, the trust in the relationship between my mother and myself, and the prior knowledge I had as an insider, facilitated rather than hindered the process. I could not imagine my mother sitting for long interviews with a stranger about her life in the Sufi community. Even in our taped interviews she was at times self-conscious of the image she was projecting of herself and the community and needed my reassurance that I would not include anything she did not want me to include. My status as a privileged insider also gave me a point of reference and comparison to check the information I received from my interviewee with the information I had as a privileged member. For instance, in my conversations with the women I interviewed I was often able to ask about a particular person or event or correct the date and time of certain happenings.

My second anxiety as an insider was whether my research would also benefit my Sufi community or if I was using my privileged position for my own gain. Since the aim of my research is to draw attention to the often censored and neglected study of Sufi women, I believe that my research raises the much-needed awareness in the community about women's involvement as practitioners of Sufism. It would also provide a vehicle for Sufi women of my community to voice their opinions, their experiences, and their knowledge in interaction with the discourse of Sufism. My assumptions were reaffirmed by the women I have interviewed. I was repeatedly reassured by my interviewees of the importance of the research I was doing and in many instances, I was told that the interview itself had helped them understand the issues more clearly. I was furthermore encouraged to make these conversations and discussions available to the larger community to the benefit of all members.

Finally, my status as a privileged insider does not necessarily mean that my identity as a Sufi member is fixed and my interaction with other members of the community is also fixed and/or self-

evident. As Gladys Ganiel and Claire Mitchell argue in their perceptive paper, "Turning the Categories Inside-Out: Complex Identifications and Multiple Interactions in Religious Ethnography," not only "religious identities of researchers and participants are better conceptualized as points on a continuum…religious identities must also be set in the context of multiple identities." Such a perspective would offer a more complex analysis of the relationship between the researcher and the participant than the traditional insider/outsider dichotomy. For example, in my conversations with Sufi women in the large global Nimatullahi community, I was often aware of the ways in which my class, my ethnicity, my level of education, my bilingual multicultural identity, and my feminist perspective affect my engagement with other Sufi women.

In what follows I will first provide an introduction to the Nimatullahi Sufi order. I will provide a brief history of the order in Iran, its challenges in the modern era, and the many ways it has changed through its expansion outside Iran. I will then briefly discuss the structure of the order and its common practices, rituals, and codes of ethics. Finally, I will narrate women's lived experiences in the Nimatullahi Sufi order in Iran and elsewhere as observed and experienced by myself, my mother, and five other women whom I have interviewed for one to three hours at various Sufi houses in the United States and England. Three of the women I interviewed were born and raised in Iran. One is American. One is from Benin, West Africa. And one is Canadian. All of the women I interviewed had been initiated into the Nimatullahi order more than 15 years ago.[1] Although I hope that the analysis of early teaching texts will reverberate through the enthnography chapter (since many of the texts that I discuss are still central in Sufi ethos and practice), my ethnography chapter does not address the significance of the early texts of Sufism to the contemporary women of the Nimatullahi Sufi order and/or whether they are at all familiar with the textual tradition of Sufism.

Section 1: A Brief History of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order in Iran and Its Expansion in the West

The Nimatullahi Sufi order takes its name from Shah Nimatullah Wali who founded the order in the Islamic eighth/fourteenth century. Shah Nimatullah was born in Aleppo in 731/1331. He was attracted to Sufism at an early age and after many years of wandering in search of his spiritual master, he finally found his teacher in a pilgrimage to Mecca and became a disciple of Shaykh ‘Abdullah Yafi’i. After years of serving his master, he began to travel, first to Egypt and then to Persia. By the time he settled in the small city of Mahan (located twenty miles south-east of Kerman, Iran), he had a family and enjoyed a reputation as a spiritual leader. In the last forty years of his life, Shah Nimatullah lived in the Kerman province (mostly in Mahan), composed poetry and essays, and received thousands of visitors across the Persian land and beyond.

Shah Nimatullah had a great impact on the development of Sufism in at least three ways. First, he never refused anyone who sought spiritual guidance, believing that all individuals could travel the path according to their capacity for Truth. Second, Shah Nimatullah made his living as a farmer and insisted that his disciples work for a living if they could, and discouraged them from begging. Third, he traveled quite extensively and had hundreds of thousands of followers some of whom were outside the Persian territories, especially in India.

Although Shah Nimatullah had trained many disciples as shaykhs or representatives of the order, he appointed his only son Khalilullah as his spiritual heir and successor, who moved and settled in the kingdom of Deccan in India, where the seat of the order remained for more than three hundred years.

Very little is known of the Nimatullahi order during the time its spiritual seat was in India. Although popular in Deccan, the Nimatullahi order did not spread widely in the Indian subcontinent.

It also continued to have a small number of adherents in Persia. It is at the time of Reza Ali Shah Deccani, toward the end of the twelfth/eighteenth century, that the order returns to Persia, at the request of Persian visitors of the master. However, the revival of the Nimatullahi order in Persia came with a heavy price, facing extreme opposition and persecution.[2]

It is therefore understandable that after such a bloody and costly revival, the Nimatullahi Sufi order saw its very survival on pacifying the ulama (the scholars or authorities of the Islamic institution) by going out of their way to conform to the established Islamic norms and keeping the inward path hidden from the view of the uninitiated. As Nasrollah Pourjavady observes, the Sufi lodges (*khaniqah*s) became more like mosques; canonical prayers and religious observances were integrated into the communal practices of the Sufi lodges. Not only did the masters dress as mullahs, many of them were of the ulama. [3]

The Nimatullahi Sufi order finally entered the modern era with the age-long tradition consisting of Sufi discourses, initiation and gathering rituals, codes of etiquette and conduct, and a hierarchical structure. What parts of this tradition are unchangeable and what parts change in order to adapt to the emerging transformations of modern-day social norms is a challenge that falls to the master of the order at any specific time and place. For example, Shah Nimatullah was a Sunni at the time when the Sunnis were still the majority in the Persian territories and the quarrel between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites had not yet taken the extreme and fanatical form it took during the sixteenth century. However, when the Nimatullahi order returned to Iran in the eighteenth century, the country had already turned into a Shi'ite stronghold and the Nimatullahi order adapted to this change. Another example is the support of Wafa Ali Shah (1264/1847-1336/1918), one of the masters of the order, for the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911 and his attempt to start the first modern school (with a Western-influenced curriculum) in Shiraz.

Without doubt, modernity was the biggest challenge for all of the surviving traditions in twentieth-century Iran. In the span of fifty-four years (from 1925 to 1979) the country went through a rapid and massive modernization effort; from basic infrastructure building (roads, bridges, dams, power plants) to the establishment of organizational bureaucracies, the adaptation of the French commercial law and the penal code, and the expansion of secular education, modern Iran gradually created a middle-class of civil servants and professionals.

It was under the leadership of Javad Nurbakhsh (1926-2008) that the Nimatullahi Sufi order addressed these challenges of modernization beginning in the 1950s. He was well equipped for the task. He was the first master to receive a modern (Western) education and to wear modern Western clothing. After completing his medical degree at Tehran University (1952), he obtained his Psychiatric specialization from the Sorbonne (1963). He was also the first to have a 9 to 5 job. He was the head of the department of psychiatry at Tehran University and the director of the teaching hospital attached to that department. Finally, he was the first master to bring the Nimatullahi order to the West.

Although the core teaching of Sufism, traveling the spiritual path towards the Truth by the means of love and devotion, does not change with historical time, the modern identity of the Nimatullahi Sufi order gradually changed the traditional structure of the order especially as it relates to changing gender norms. On the one hand, the order's transition to modernity gradually opened the male-dominated environment of the order to more women and created more possibilities for a fuller participation as members of the community. On the other hand, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 leading to the self-exile of Nurbakhsh and the expansion of the order in the West, tested the relationship of the order to Islam as it tried to navigate the hostile environment of the Islamic theocracy while adapting to completely new sociopolitical surroundings in the West.

In many ways, the Nimatullahi Sufi order under Nurbakhsh experienced a revival comparable to the advent of Ma'sum Ali Shah's trip from India. At the time Nurbakhsh assumed the leadership of the order, Nimatullahi Sufis had one Sufi lodge in Tehran which was owned by the previous master (Munes Ali Shah). The Sufi practice was so entrenched in superstitions and various Islamic observances, it was difficult to distinguish its tenets and foundations; many members had turned to using hashish and opium; there was hardly a community capable of supporting the order either structurally or financially. Nurbakhsh expanded the order by publishing Sufi books, building Sufi lodges, and introducing Sufism to a younger generation. At the same time, he purged the Sufi lodges from drug use and asked his disciples to work for a living. Still the changes Nurbakhsh introduced to the Nimatullahi Order were not welcomed by all. Some Sufis in the order or outside, did not approve of his insistence on distinguishing a *khaniqah* from a mosque, his efforts to expand Sufism in the West, or his unorthodox way of opening the doors of the *khaniqah* to whoever shows an interest.

By 1979 (the year of the Islamic Revolution), Nurbakhsh had built sixty-three Sufi centers across Iran, one lodge in London, and three lodges in the United States. The number of active (participating) members had risen from hundreds to around five thousand, with sympathetic followers attending open lodges in tens of thousands.

Another important development during Nurbakhsh's time as the leader of the Nimatullahi Sufi community was the noticeable increase in women's memberships and participation. The position of women in Sufi communities has always been a matter of controversy from the point of view of the Islamic clergy, who accused men and women Sufis of having sexual affairs under the guise of spiritual learning. Before Nurbakhsh assumed the leadership of the order, women did not have a noticeable presence in the community. Aside from a few women who visited the master

occasionally, the weekly gatherings of the Sufis were for male participants only. Nurbakhsh initiated many women into the order and constructed a separate meeting place for the women members. Still because of religious/cultural constraints, women did not participate in the rituals or associate with the master or the shaykhs as freely as their male counterparts. They also did not occupy public positions in the hierarchy of the order. Even before the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which made the wearing of the *hijab* mandatory for all women, Sufi women had to wear a *chador* (the most conservative form of *hijab*, covering head to toe except for the face and the hands) in the Sufi lodges and occupy a segregated space (except in the kitchen when men and women at times worked together).

The establishment of the Islamic theocracy in Iran has had a profound effect on the structure of the order in many different ways. One significant development was the departure of the master from Iran, five months after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. He predicted the dictatorial direction of Islamic theocracy under the leadership of Khomeini and opposed it vehemently. Realizing that he either has to submit to Khomeini's regime or suffer imprisonment and death, Nurbakhsh left the country for England. Shortly after, the Sufi community came under attack by the fundamentalist regime. Many Sufi lodges were taken over by the Islamic militia. (Today, out of the original 63 Sufi lodges, only 11 are still open and functioning). Some Sufi men and women were taken for questioning. A few men were beaten and tortured. Such pressures have had tremendous effects on the relationship between men and women Sufis in Sufi lodges or at public gatherings in Iran where Sufi men have become more inclined to police Sufi women, making sure that there was nothing culturally inappropriate or suspect from the point of view of the Islamic law, in women's appearance or their conduct. In some Sufi lodges there has even been talk of excluding women from the already segregated public gatherings in order to minimize the risk of a fundamentalist Islamic attack.

However, Iranian Sufi women have fiercely fought for their rights to public gathering. Moreover, because the center of the order had moved from Iran, first to the United States and then to England where the master of the order resided after the 1979 revolution, Iranian Sufis were gradually exposed to contrasting gender norms. Through constant contact with the Sufi communities in the West, especially the lodges in England (London and Banbury), the Iranian Sufi community learned to modify its understanding of gender and to view women as full-fledged members of the community.

The plan for the expansion of the Nimatullahi Sufi order in the West started with the initiation of a few young American seekers who had traveled to Iran between 1972 and 1973 in search of a spiritual master. The first Nimatullahi Sufi lodge in the West (and also the first outside Iran) was established in the heart of London in 1974. In the summer of 1975, the master of the order made his first trip to the United States and initiated some Americans and Iranians in various cities. In the years that followed, the order established Sufi lodges in the United States, Europe and several other countries around the world. The pace of this development accelerated in the summer of 1979 when the master of the order went into exile in England. Today the Nimatullahi Sufi order has ten lodges in the United States, three in Canada, ten in Europe, four in Africa, two in Russia and one in Australia. In fact, at present the order has more lodges outside of Iran than inside its country of origin. In addition to the official lodges, weekly meditation meetings (Sufi sessions) are also held in many places around the world where a lodge has not yet been established. An unofficial estimate of the membership outside of Iran is close to 2000.

The gender-segregated structure of Sufi lodges was transformed as soon as it left Iran in 1974. Outside of the influence of the religious orthodoxy, men and women could occupy the same space for meditation and public rituals. In the order's English publication, written or translated for Western readers, the original neutral pronouns in Persian referring to the Sufis who held different

offices in the order gave away to he/she constructions. In the official website of the order (www.nimatullahi.org), among "spiritual principles of the Nimatullahi order," one finds: "there is no distinction made between men and women." Gradually a few women Sufis outside of Iran rose to the rank of *dudedar* (an older more experienced *darvish* [traveler on the path] in charge of serving tea and food), as *pir-i dalil* (an older experienced *darvish* assisting the shaykh in his responsibilities). The first and only woman shaykh (to this date) was appointed in 2004. Women in Sufi communities inside and outside Iran continue to raise questions about gender equality in ritual practices and community activities.

The changing dynamic of the gender structure within the Nimatullahi Sufi order is also symptomatic of larger transformations in relation to the Islamic identity and the Persian culture. The Nimatullahi Sufi order under the leadership of Nurbakhsh gradually distanced itself from the Islamic identity that had shaped the order through many centuries. In his discourses Nurbakhsh emphasized the teaching of Abu Sai'd's school of Sufism where chivalry, altruism, and service take primacy over religious rituals. Like many Sufis before him, Nurbakhsh also sought to redefine the Islamic ritual practices according to the Sufi worldview. For example, Sufi prayer in his view was not limited to a daily ritual, but a ritual encapsulating the entire journey of the believer towards God, where she/he leaves both worlds behind and performs the special prayer for the dead over the corpse of her/his ego; or the Sufi fast was not only a month-long fast, but a daily one of fasting from everything other than God.[4] Although he had made the pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*) as a young leader of the order, he did not advise his followers to do so, but would instead encourage them to spend their money on alleviating other people's suffering. Still, recognizing that most of his followers in Iran were deeply religious, Nurbakhsh did not make drastic changes in relation to the Islamic identity of the order. Even when he started to expand the order in the West, he would convert the

seekers to Islam before initiating them to the Sufi path. However, gradually he stopped the public prayers in the Sufi lodges outside Iran as he started to distinguish between the Sufi identity versus the Islamic identity in his discourses. By the time his son and successor, Alireza Nurbakhsh took over the leadership of the order in 2009 conversion to Islam was no longer a mandatory step towards initiation.

The cultural identity of the Nimatullahi Sufi order, which was bound for centuries to Persian culture, also underwent a gradual transformation during the expansion of the order outside Iran. However, unlike the Islamic identity, Persian identity had a more staying power. For one thing, Javad Nurbakhsh was a Persian-speaking master. Though he knew French, he could not use it to communicate with his mostly American and English followers. Non-Persian disciples were therefore eager to learn the language in order to communicate with him directly. Those who did not learn the language were nevertheless exposed to the culture through classical Persian music and poetry that was played in the Sufi lodges, Persian calligraphy and art that hung on the walls of all Sufi meditation rooms, and Persian cuisine that was served at master's *sofreh* (a tablecloth spread for serving food). Increasingly, there was a need for translations of his poetry, other Sufi poetry, or master's discourses, to English and other languages. Nonetheless, over the years the Persian identity of the order has to some extent yielded its significance to a multicultural, multilingual identity. In the annual gatherings where people come from all over the world you can now hear non-Persian musical instruments and singing in many languages. Persian cuisine is no longer the only cuisine served in Sufi lodges or during the Sufi annual gatherings. Also, since the present master of the order is fluent in English and Persian and has spent most of his adult life in the West, not only can he deliver his discourses in both languages and speak with his followers mostly without interpreters (unless they don't know English which is nowadays less common), but he can also reference Western culture as

well as Persian culture in his speeches and his writing.

Section 2: The Organization, Rituals, and Codes of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order

In order to have any understanding of women's participation in the Nimatullahi Sufi order it is important to look at the order as a faith-based organization with a hierarchical structure and a set of practices, rituals, and codes of conduct.

The traditional hierarchy of the order and the positions according to the official publication of the order, *The Path*, can be summarized in the following manner.

1) The master of the order is the spiritual leader of the Sufi community. In any Sufi order there is only one master.
2) The shaykh is the representative of the master appointed by him who has permission to initiate and/or guide the seekers. The shaykh must at least have twelve years' experience on the spiritual path and must have previously held the position of *pir-i dalil*. There can be as many shaykhs as the master sees fit.
3) The *pir-i dalil* (counselor) is the assistant to the shaykh. The *pir-i dalil* must have had continuous and prolonged experience in Sufism and have passed at least three of the spiritual stations of Sufism. The selection of the *pir-i dalil* depends upon the recommendation of the shaykh and the permission of the master.
4) The *dudedar* or tea master is responsible for serving tea at Sufi gatherings and ceremonies. The *dudedar* must have at least passed two of the spiritual stations of Sufism and have an adequate understanding of the proper ways of

behaving with the *darvish*es (members of the Sufi community). The *dudedar* is selected by the *pir-i dalil* depending on the permission of the shaykh and the approval of the master.

5) *Ahl-i khedmat* or *darvish*es of service are chosen by the *pir-i dalil* for service in the Sufi gatherings.

Women have not occupied the position of the master or the spiritual leader in the Nimatullahi Sufi order or any other Sufi order in pre-modern Iran. As discussed in chapter one of this dissertation, they might have acted as shaykhs or *pir-i dalil* to women Sufi followers on certain occasions, but for the most part women were historically absent in positions of power and authority. In fact, before the expansion of the order to the West, the only position afforded to women was the position of *Ahl-i khedmat* or *darvish*es of service at the bottom of the hierarchy.

On the other hand, the initiation to Sufism has been fairly open to women. In all Sufi orders the practice of Sufism starts with an initiation ritual. After the seeker expresses her/his readiness to enter the path of spiritual poverty and has secured the permission of the shaykh or the master, the *pir-i dalil* instructs the seeker on his/her initiation. The initiation ritual in the Nimatullahi Sufi order as described in *The Path* begins with five ablutions (*ghusls*): *ghusl* of repentance (*tawba*), *ghusl* of submission (Islam), *ghusl* of initiation into spiritual poverty (*faqr*), *ghusl* of pilgrimage (*ziyarat*), and *ghusl* of fulfillment (*qada-yi hajat*). The seeker is asked to bring five objects to the master for the initial ceremony: a few yards of white cloth, a whole nutmeg, a ring, a coin, and some rock candy. Each of these objects has a symbolic significance: the white cloth represents the seeker's shroud as in a dead body in submission to the master, the whole nutmeg represents the seeker's head consenting to never reveal the divine secrets that are confided in her/him, the ring represents the seeker's devotion to God, the coin symbolizes the material wealth and the promise of detachment

from that, and the rock candy is an offering for a celebration of a new birth. The *pir-i dalil* takes the seeker's hand and the bundle of objects she/he has prepared and enters the master's or shaykh's presence and places the hand of the seeker into the hand of the master/shaykh and leaves the room. The master or shaykh then instructs the seeker in the remembrance of God (*zikr*).

Upon entering the path of spiritual poverty, the traveler is asked to attend the meditation meetings twice a week. On Thursdays and Sundays the Sufi lodge is open to *darvish*es (members of the Sufi community) for meditation and work. The work done in the Sufi lodges includes cleaning, gardening, repairing the house, editing and copyediting the publications of the order, cooking for the community or preparing food for the homeless. The meditation hours are in the evenings. They start either with silent meditation or contemplative music. *Darvish*es sit in meditative postures on the floor of the *jamkhane* (the meeting room). Older *darvish*es or *darvish*es with disabilities sit on chairs. The lights are slowly dimmed and official session starts with a brief recorded discourse by the master of the order on various Sufi topics like devotion, divine love, unity, sincerity, steadfastness, and so forth. Then the session continues with recitation of Sufi poetry, Sufi music, and singing. If singers and musicians are available at the session, the music is performed live. Otherwise, recorded music is played. The meditation sessions usually last between one to two hours. Before and after the sessions, the tea master and the serving crew serve tea and sweets.

Observing the manners or etiquette (*adab*) of entering the Sufi lodge for work or meditation is also part of the Sufi training. Generally, new travelers are instructed to focus on their *zikr* (remembrance of God) and to follow the leads of the experienced Sufis in all activities in the Sufi lodge. Furthermore, they must learn not to insist on their opinion and accept others with open hearts. Since travelers come from diverse backgrounds, the practice of accepting fellow travelers with open hearts and without judgement becomes challenging when *darvish*es are asked to work together on a

certain project or when they live in a Sufi lodge either temporarily or for a longer period. This communal training, a tradition going back to Abu Sa'id and other training masters of Khurasan, is the hallmark of the practice of Sufism in the Nimatullahi Sufi order.

Aside from the regular weekly sessions the *darvish*es take part in the bigger gatherings of the *digjush* (literally boiling cauldron), which is an elaborate ceremony/ritual presided over by the master or a shaykh with permission from the master. Traditionally the purpose of the *digjush* was to celebrate a traveler's entry into the path of spiritual poverty by a *sama'* session that included vocal *zikr*, music, singing, clapping, and ecstatic movements. At the end of the ceremony the *darvish*es of service would serve the lamb they had prepared as soup and meat wraps to the Sufi community. Today because of the expansion of the order, the occasion of the *digjush* is even more elaborate and lengthy than before. Once or twice a year more than six hundred *darvish*es gather from all over the world for a 5-day festival in the center near Banbury, England, or in the US center in Santa Fe, New Mexico. They set up tents on the grounds of the center and live as a community for a few days. Musicians and singers of the order are a big part of the festival. Though the actual ceremony happens in one day and lasts between four to five hours, in the days and nights leading to the ceremony people are playing music, singing, clapping, and engaging in *sama'*. The *digjushe*s also offer the chance for *darvish*es to visit the master, work and eat together, and learn from the elders and more experienced Sufis in the community.

Although in modern times the Nimatullahi Sufi order has published many books on the subject of Sufism, the traditional practices of the path have little to do with books and intellectual learning. *Darvish*es are asked to practice meditation (*muraqibi*) and self-examination (*muhasiba*) daily, to engage in remembrance of God as often as they can, to devote themselves to service, and to practice loving kindness in interactions with the world. Gradually, as their hearts open to divine

Truth, they will experience spiritual stations, visions, and emotional states that at times are confusing or overwhelming. They seek guidance from *pir-i dalil*, the shaykh, or the master as appropriate. But the advice given to each traveler is for that traveler alone. Since the most challenging aspect of the Sufi's path is getting rid of one's ego and letting go of the illusion of the self, open discussions of one's path can lead to vanity, jealousy, resentment, or confusion. What is perceived as secrecy in the Sufi path is therefore a provision guarding against a conniving *nafs* (ego). On the other hand, because of the intimate and private nature of every traveler's journey towards the Truth, a lot hinges on the traveler's relationship with the master. Without the attention of the guide, a perfected master who has already traveled the way, and his help, the traveler cannot find her/his way.

Section 3: Women's Lived Experiences in Sufi Communities in Iran

Growing up in a Sufi community in Iran, which was for the most part sex-segregated, I spent a lot of time among women *darvish*es. I use the word "*darvish*" instead of the word "Sufi" to uphold the distinction in the Sufi community between a perfect human being (Sufi) and a wayfarer or traveler on the path of Sufism (*darvish*). Women *darvish*es like their male counterparts were from all walks of life and varieties of socioeconomic backgrounds. They also varied in their devotion and adherence to Islam. Over the years, I was also struck by the different perspective each woman had on Sufism and what it meant to her personally.

It was often customary for women to share their stories of initiation, the circumstances leading them to the spiritual path. From all the stories I have heard, one is particularly vivid in my memory. It was during one of the two Eids (celebrations) in the Sufi lodge in Tehran. The Sufi Center was a complex of several buildings, one of which was held as living quarters of the master

and his family. Any female visitors to the lodge would stay with the family. I remember that the Eids were a particularly exciting time for that very reason. One of the frequent visitors of the lodge during the celebration time was a woman *darvish* named Farkhondeh Khanum. I remember that I was always drawn to her, but I can only speculate as to why. She was a tall heavy-built Kurdish woman in her sixties, dressed in traditional colorful Kurdish attire with head turban (*sarband*), who was always accompanied by Kurdish men who appeared to be in her command. She seemed to be a community leader of some sort. Was I drawn to her because of her unusual status as a leader, her different appearance, or her mannerism as a woman genuinely interested in Sufism? I do not know. But on that particular day, on the eve of the Sufi celebration, I asked her whether she could tell me her story of coming to the Sufi lodge and embarking on the Sufi path. I don't know exactly how I framed the question, but I do remember that it was in the middle of a very friendly and informal conversation. I was around fifteen years old and thinking back it seems odd for a young girl of that age to have posed a serious and personal question like that to an older woman with Farkhondeh's status. Perhaps I was emboldened by the fact that I was the master's daughter, and *darvish*es in general (male or female) had a special regard for his family. Her response to my question, however, challenged me at many levels. This is what she said.

Farkhondeh: "Dear girl, there is nothing to tell. As Hafez puts it:

> *We have not come to this door seeking material wealth and status*
> *We have come to seek refuge from a misfortune.* [the misfortunes of this world]"

Why have I remembered this story more vividly that any other stories told to me by hundreds of women *darvish*es over the years? I ask myself. And why am I prefacing a chapter on ethnography of contemporary women *darvish*es of the Nimatullahi order with a woman's refusal to tell her

personal narrative and her use of a seemingly simple verse of Hafez (one of the most revered Persian poets) to sum up her interest in Sufism? One aspect of Farkhondeh Khanum's response, which I think is important in understanding women's lived experiences in the Sufi community in Iran, is the description of one's faith as a place of refuge, especially from the misfortunes of the world. Over the years, I have heard many stories of women coming to the Sufi path by way of some kind of trauma and suffering: losing a child, living with an addicted husband, dealing with memories of incest or sexual abuse, being sick and/or caring for the sick, being trapped in an unhealthy marriage, and so forth. While looking for spiritual guidance as a result of suffering and trauma is fairly common to all forms of spirituality and religious beliefs, there is bound to be a difference in the role of faith in societies where there are no social, legal, or medical services and structures for helping people deal with problems such as addiction, abuse, incest, divorce, trauma, and more. Nurbakhsh was often heard to say that he seldom dealt with problems concerning spirituality. Rather, he said disappointedly, "People come to me for help in coping with everyday life problems." The fact that he was also a practicing psychiatrist did not unusually increase his involvement in his disciples' everyday problems, although it may have made his interventions more effective. To this day, the shaykhs of the order in Iran are asked to advise their disciples on various social and psychological issues.

I'm not suggesting that all women *darvish*es in Iran found their way to the Sufi lodge as a result of some trauma. For some, Sufism started with spiritual yearning, even at a young age. For others, experiencing trauma resulted in a kind of spiritual awakening. A woman *darvish* recently told me that she had a near-death experience in a car accident in her early twenties, which hospitalized her for a year. After that experience, she said, her outlook on life completely changed and she started to search for a spiritual path. I have heard similar stories in the Sufi community by both men and

women *darvish*es. But I do want to emphasize that based on my observations through the years, at least for some women *darvish*es in Iran, Sufism functions as a way of coping with social, emotional, and psychological issues. Now to what extent the teachings of Sufism or the direct interventions of the shaykhs and the master can provide relief for these women is unclear and warrants a careful ethnographic study.

Another aspect of Farkhondeh Khanum's response, which is crucial to any discussion of ethnographies of women on the Sufi path, is her use of self-effacement as a teaching and practicing tool. It's important to acknowledge that not all anonymity and invisibility of women on the Sufi path are imposed on women by men in power. The practice of selflessness is the core of Sufi teachings. Many women and men of the Sufi path have consciously veiled themselves from an outside view, choosing not to draw attention to themselves and their narratives.

At the same time, one can argue that if self-negation and self-effacement is at the core of Sufi teachings, then claiming any identity, including a gendered one, is in opposition to Sufi teachings. In fact, this dilemma defines the difficulty of embracing feminism and Sufism at the same time, a struggle I have lived with for most of my adult life. However, what I have found in Sufi discourses and the community of Sufis is that often self-negation and self-effacement are feminized according to cultural expectations that create gender dichotomies. Thus, women are expected to be invisible, to serve others, and to forgo their desires in ways that men are not. Making women in Sufism visible therefore, is not meant as a rebuke to the Sufi principle of selflessness, but as an affirmation of self-awareness in any transformation involving the self and the community. It is in this spirit that I sat down with women of the Nimatullahi Sufi order and discussed the many ways in which gender has played a part in their social and spiritual lives.

Subsection 1: Parvaneh Daneshvar (Pragmatic Optimism)

In the summer of 2008 two American documentary filmmakers came to my parents' residence in England to interview my father as the master of the Nimatullahi Sufi order. By that time my father was already ill. It was difficult for him to sit up for more than twenty minutes at a time. The interview was clearly an ordeal. But he accommodated the Americans gracefully, even managing to use his wit and sense of humor, an important part of his personality, to engage with the filmmakers on his own terms. His message was loud and clear; *You can't understand Sufism by interviewing people or talking about it, Sufism is a lived experience.* At the end of the last interview my mother was also in the room. The interviewers asked if they could also interview my mother briefly. My mother accepted. They asked my mother how she had managed to cook food for so many people for so many years. My mother did not tell me what she answered. But both she and the translator (also a woman) were irritated and indignant that the only question an American male filmmaker and researcher could ask my mother was about her kitchen duties.

When my mother told me the story that day (right after it happened), I remember thinking to myself that I'm probably the best person to interview her. We were close, she trusted me, and I never saw her as an extension of my father (the Master) but as a woman in her own right. However, I knew that I had to wait for the right time and place. Two and a half years after my father's passing, in March 2011, I finally had the opportunity to spend some time with my mother alone, while she was visiting me in Washington, D.C. I had already told her about my research interest in women's involvement in Sufism and the possibility of using her life history as a means of exploring this topic. I did not need to persuade her; she was eager to start the project. Understandably, we were both a little nervous, not knowing what to expect and where it would lead. But gradually the recorded interviews spilled over to our daily conversations, forcing me to be always prepared with a note pad

and a pen in case I needed to jot down some notes.

Parvaneh Daneshvar's life history starts in the city of Shiraz, located in the southwest of Iran, and known as the city of poets, gardens, wine, and flowers. Compared to other major cities in the South, Shiraz has always been more open to progressive ideas and movements. From literary and intellectual giants like Sa'di and Hafez in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to the Bahai progressive religious movement in the nineteenth century, to the Constitutional Revolution in the early twentieth century, Shiraz has been a leading force in progressive thinking and promoting change.

Parvaneh was born in 1933 to a wealthy family. Her father, Abdullah Daneshvar was a renowned physician who belonged to one of the elite families of Shiraz. Her mother's family was known for their religious/spiritual leadership in Shiraz. Their family name, Zu'l-Riyasatayn, translates as "holders of two leadership positions," one in *shari'a* (Islamic law) and one in Sufism.

Having lost her father to Malta fever when she was three years old, Parvaneh was raised in the Zu'l-Riyasatayn household, a large complex where an extended family of uncles, aunts, grandparents, and children lived together. At first, she and her mother moved in with her great-grandmother (Parvaneh's grandmother had died young and her mother was raised by her grandmother). Later, a few years after her great-grandmother died (Parvaneh was around twelve years old), her mother married her paternal cousin who was a widower and lived in the same complex. Parvaneh's stepfather was the son of the Sufi master of the Nimatullahi order. I asked my mother what it was like for her growing up in a Sufi household.

— Parvaneh: Well you know when I was growing up my understanding was that my mother's family were religious people. They did what religious people would do; they prayed, fasted, they participated in all religious rituals, especially the Moharam [the month associated with

the martyrdom of Imam Hussain]. They also had their Sufi gatherings once a week on Thursday nights in a small courtyard in the house, which was completely separated from our private quarters. But we could hear their voices when they had vocal *zikr*s [repetition of a name or a phrase associated with God]. I don't exactly know what I thought about Sufism when I was growing up. Perhaps I thought that Sufis had a special relationship with God. But outwardly there was not much difference between them and other people I knew, except for the way they treated servants, maids, people of lower classes or positions. I remember that as a young girl I noticed that. My mother's family, like all wealthy families of Shiraz, had servants. But they treated their servants respectfully. The servants were part of the family, they ate with everyone else, and they were never mistreated. But this was not so in other households. We also had a very good relationship with our Jewish neighbors. I remember that on Saturdays they would sometimes bring their kettles to our kitchen so that we could boil water for them. They also treated the Bahai neighbors with respect. Later on, I realized that not all people were as tolerant of religious minorities as our Sufi family. My mother's family was also pro-constitutional revolution; the Master himself was actually involved in the movement which was basically against political tyranny and for achieving democracy. I heard stories about how our house was raided by the anti-constitutional forces and how some of the male family members were arrested.

— Safoura: What about their attitudes towards women? Was that different as well?" My mother looked at me as if she did not understand my question. To help her respond I asked: "For instance, did they believe in educating their daughters? You already said that your mother was sent to school? Was this typical of families of that class in Shiraz?"

— Parvaneh: I don't know. I suppose most of the women of my mother's generation and class were schooled one way or another. But I remember that my mother's grandmother was also

educated to some degree. She could read poetry, and the Qur'an, and she could write letters. I think that was a bit unusual. But on the whole, I can tell you that their attitude towards women was much more progressive than the narrow religious attitude of the clergy.

— Safoura: What about *hijab*? What kind of *hijab* did women wear in your family?

— Parvaneh: They wore light *chadors* [light in both material and color] inside the house and dark *chadors* when they went out. But my mother's generation had to submit to the mandatory unveiling of Reza Shah. After that my mother sometimes veiled and sometimes didn't, according to the occasions and circumstances. I grew up pretty much without the veil, except when I went to the mosque or attended religious ceremonies inside or outside the house. I took on the veil later on before I married your father. Nobody in my family forced me to do it. Many of my cousins never took the veil, but I did it on my own and continued doing that after I got married.

Parvaneh attended a crowded public school until ninth grade. She remembered being serious about schoolwork. "But," she adds, "I was never an excellent student, just a hardworking average student who loved going to school. I was always one of the first students at the school, before they even opened the classes and started the heaters." She also had fond memories of joining the school volleyball team, which required daily practice in the early hours of the morning. "I was always very active," she recalled. I asked her if she felt any restrictions compared to the boys in the family. She said, "No, not really."

In order to get her high school diploma, she had to move to a private school. However, she could not afford the tuition. Luckily, a relative working for the education ministry found out about my mother's dilemma and negotiated a deal with the private school so that my mother did not have to pay any tuition. She got her diploma from Mehr-Ayeen private high school at the end of the eleventh grade. Since there were no scholarships available for twelfth grade (pre-college), my

mother decided to start working as an elementary school teacher. Because she was under eighteen she was paid half of the official teacher's salary, which was 150 tomans a month. After teaching two years at a public elementary school, she was invited to join the faculty of Mehr-Ayeen school as a math teacher for fifth and sixth grade. My mother proudly explained that in the two years she taught at Mehr-Ayeen all of her students successfully passed the national exams.

Our conversations gradually turned to my mother's memories of Sufi women who were disciples of Munes Ali Shah (my grandmother's uncle). I asked my mother: "What about women in the Sufi order? Do you remember any Sufi women when you were growing up?" My mother started her response by saying that Sufism was by and large a male undertaking. "Women were on the periphery, you know. For a long time, they did not have their own gathering. They were more or less invisible." Having stated this caveat, my mother went on to talk about a few women disciples of Munes Ali Shah. She could only name five women: Nimtaj Khanum, Mohtaram Khanum, Bibi Saltanat, Bibi Ghamar, and Bibi Mabagom. All of these women were married, although she remembered that her unmarried friend who was a few years older than her (in her early twenties) had asked her for an introduction to the Master and was subsequently initiated. Of the women my mother named, the first two were married to Sufi men. That explains (to some extent) why they were able to visit the Master on their own, sometimes traveling from other cities to do so. The other three women came from the Bakhtiari tribe. They were women of status who were married to tribal leaders. According to my mother, as tribal women of status these women enjoyed more freedom in their interactions with the Sufi master and other men in general. They also had their own tribal clothing, which distinguished them from the rest of the women in the town. However, even these tribal women could not sit in the Sufi gatherings, which the Master attended. Sufi women would always sit in a separate room. My mother remembered a Sufi gathering in Haft Tan (a holy place in Shiraz

where it is believed seven Sufis are buried) where around ten women were seated in a separate room. She thinks that between fifty to eighty men were in attendance. My mother also remembered that an American woman was initiated into the order by Munes Ali Shah. She has no other memory of that woman except that she had seen her picture in a white robe. She told me that I should look into the Sufi lodge visual archive for that.

My mother's marriage to my father started with a simple correspondence. At this point my mother had seen my father (from a distance) once or twice when he had accompanied Munes Ali Shah to Shiraz. After the passing of Munes Ali Shah, my father who was already a trusted shaykh of the master, assumed the leadership of the order at the age of twenty-seven. With the recommendation of some Sufi friends he wrote to my mother's family asking for my mother's hand in marriage. My mother and her family accepted. A year later my mother traveled to Tehran at the request of my father to finalize the marriage contract. My mother acknowledged that this was against the custom. Ordinarily, my father would have to come to my mother's house, talk to her family, and arrange for the wedding. Many of the family members were outraged by my father's request. But my mother's stepfather decided to oblige my father, believing that his request was based on his desire to make arrangements for the one-year anniversary of Munes Ali Shah's passing. In any case, my mother, accompanied by her mother and her stepfather, traveled to Tehran for the wedding negotiations.

This move proved to be more complicated than anticipated. Other friends and relatives had already moved to negotiate marriage offers with my father. Not only was he a young physician with a bright career and a stable income, he was also a new charismatic leader of a spiritual order. When my mother realized that something was causing delays in the negotiations, she asked to talk to my father alone. In this brave encounter, she told my father that although she had lived with the Zu'l-

Riyasatayn family since early childhood, her family name was Daneshvar. “There are no stars in my horizon,” she said. “No money, no inheritance. If you want me as I am, I’m happy to be your wife. But if you have changed your mind for whatever reason, do not worry about me. I can return to Shiraz with my family. No damage has been done.” Later, after they married, my father told her that he was much impressed by my mother’s honesty and directness. The wedding ceremony was by all standards very modest. It took place in the Tehran Sufi lodge with very few guests, mostly my mother’s relatives and friends. Since my father’s family lived in the city of Kerman, a long distance from Tehran, he decided not to postpone the wedding for their arrival. “Do you think that marriage was the only possible choice for the women of your generation?” I asked.

— Parvaneh: I think it was expected of young people of both sexes [men and women] to get married. Men could wait longer, but young women in their late teens and early twenties were expected to get married. There were always a few exceptions, men and women who for whatever reasons did not get married, and they would stay on with their families.

— Safoura: Could women of your generation have a career? They could go to universities, couldn’t they? And find a job afterwards.

— Parvaneh: Many of my classmates went to universities and became nurses, or high school teachers. A few went to medical schools and became doctors.

— Safoura: It seems that nursing and teaching were the traditional jobs for women everywhere.

— Parvaneh: Yes, but teaching was always an easier option. I never even considered nursing because if I wanted to train as a nurse I would have had to go to Tehran and study and it was unthinkable for me to leave the family and go to Tehran by myself. Besides I had no money to pay for it.

— Safoura: You stopped working after you got married. Was that your choice?

— Parvaneh: Well, when I first got married we moved to a small, remote town in the province of Kerman and it wasn't possible for me to work there. When we moved to Tehran I was eager to go back to teaching, but by then I had two small children and was pregnant with the third one. Of course, if your father had been supportive I could have gone back to work, but he wasn't. He did not want me to work outside. I was not happy about it then, I wanted to go out and have a job, but now looking back I understand and respect his decision. I was more needed at home.

Almost immediately after the wedding the newlyweds (accompanied by male disciples of my father) started a long journey on a bus. Their final destination was the city of Bam (in the province of Kerman), where my father was the head of the health clinic, serving a string of villages and small towns spread out in a desert region with dirt roads traveled mostly by mules. The cultural differences between Shiraz and Bam were striking. My mother was housed in one of the quarters of a big mansion with high walls. She told me she felt like she was imprisoned in a tower. Unlike in Shiraz, where young women could easily go out in groups for picnics or to play volleyball or to go to the movies, in Bam (and in the entire region of Kerman) women (young and old) spent most of their time at home. Only women of the laboring classes, mostly agricultural or domestic help, would be seen frequently outside their homes, out and about on the roads or in the marketplace. Upper-class women (of landlord families) had their own gatherings inside their mansions, where they wore fashionable clothes and even drank alcoholic beverages if they liked. This was my mother's only option for socializing. Working women as civil servants were still a rarity in the region. In the health clinic in Bam there were two educated nurse midwives, one from a Russian immigrant family (Sheikhi who was educated in Switzerland), the other a Zoroastrian. One of the midwives (Sheikhi) who assisted my father in minor surgeries and complicated births, also delivered my two brothers in

Bam. She became a close friend of my mother.

Although my father had a few disciples in the city of Bam, there was as yet no Sufi lodge there. In the span of the two and a half years that my parents lived in Bam as a married couple, my father managed to build a Sufi lodge, initiate a few people in the order, and start a weekly session. He did all of this in his free time away from the clinic, which meant that he had almost no time for my mother and his fast-growing family (my two older brothers were born a year apart in Bam). I asked my mother when she was officially initiated into Sufism and whether it was my father's idea. She said that while living in Bam she had asked my father several times before he finally agreed to initiate her.

— Safoura: Why did you want to become initiated?

— Parvaneh: Well as I told you, I grew up in the Zu'l-Riyasatayn household and so I knew about Sufism from childhood. But Sufism was also an enigma for me. There was a certain mystery associated with the practice. People could not really tell you what it meant. So, I was always drawn to it and wanted to be a part of that, but somehow it did not happen while I was living with the Zu'l-Riyasatayn family.

— Safoura: What happened after you got initiated? Did your relationship with your husband change because of that?

— Parvaneh: Well, that's a good question. It really did not change because of my initiation. I mean your father would not let it change. He had an extreme sense of humor, he was a joker. So, I didn't think that now I'm living with my master and I have to behave a certain way, I was at ease with him, I was myself, and I'm glad I could do that. Later on sometimes he would say "you know, you're not a good disciple, you never listen to me."

— Safoura: Perhaps he just wanted an obedient wife. [we laugh]

— Parvaneh: Yes, and as far as Sufism goes, you have to remember I really did not have time to think about these things in a serious way. I had five children in the span of nine years. I was so busy raising a family and taking take of the household. If I wanted to sit in a corner and say my *zikr* I don't know what would have happened to you [my children] then! [we laugh]

— Safoura: I would probably be writing a different kind of dissertation then!

Shortly after my parents moved to the Tehran Sufi lodge at the request of the disciples in Tehran and other major cities (for whom traveling to Bam to see the master was almost impossible), my father joined the faculty of Tehran University while starting his training as a psychiatrist at Ruzbeh hospital. My father's divided attention between two major responsibilities, the hospital and the Sufi lodge, in addition to other ongoing projects and professional commitments (from publishing books both on Sufism and on psychology, to seeing patients in a private office at home, to traveling to other cities to establish or visit Sufi lodges), made him scarcely available as a husband or a father. I asked my mother how she coped with the difficulty of raising a family with a husband/father who was so busy with so many other projects and responsibilities. She said, "I learned early on that if I wanted to live with your father, I needed to make myself busy with my own projects and not to expect his involvement." I reminded my mother that even though my father was not expected to be involved much with household and children's responsibilities, she was expected to be involved in the affairs of the Sufi house. For example, she would make large quantities of jams and pickles for Sufi festivals or cook for any travelers staying in the Sufi lodge. In addition, visiting (traveling) Sufi women always stayed with us in our family quarters, sometimes with their children.

— Parvaneh: I did not mind the work and the involvement. Plus, I had help. One good thing about your father was that he always made sure that I had help. Bibi Tahereh [a woman who lived with us for many years] helped with the cooking, other Sufi women would come on occasions

and help me. If I didn't have help I would not have been able to do all the sewing, the knitting, and the handicrafts I used to do.

— Safoura: Did you do it for fun, for your own enjoyment?

— Parvaneh: Yes, I liked doing that. But sometimes when I was tired it would become a burden. The truth is that we could not afford to buy clothing for five children. In those days it was expensive.

— Safoura: I remember that money was a big issue when we were growing up. You were often complaining.

— Parvaneh [My mother smiles and explains]: Of course it was. Your father gave all his salary to Mr. Kobari [an older Sufi in charge of the Tehran Sufi lodge]. I would then get a weekly allowance for running a huge household. We were always short of money. It wasn't easy, but somehow we managed.

During our initial conversations I noticed that my mother was very protective of my father's image. She did not want to blame my father for anything. She would always emphasize the fact that for my father Sufism was a priority and he dedicated his whole life to this cause. But later on, when the video recorder was off or when we were using an audio recorder instead, she would be more willing to talk about her disagreements with my father.

— Parvaneh: Our biggest issue was over spending, that is spending for the family's comfort. For the first seven years at the Tehran Sufi lodge, our living quarters were crammed and very primitive, just a few rooms. The kitchen was an old smoky room in the back, hidden away, with a log burner. There was no running hot water, which meant no shower or baths inside the house. I had to fight for a modern house, with a proper kitchen with a gas burner and cabinets and a hot water boiler and a bath inside the house, and later for a washing machine, and a freezer and the modern

appliances, which made our lives easier. When the house was finally completed I already had five small children.

Our conversation turned to women's involvement in the Sufi lodge, and whether or not there were any noticeable changes from the time of Munes Ali Shah to my father's time. She started by saying that when they moved to the Tehran Sufi lodge, very few women were initiated into the order and that the main gathering/meditation room was exclusive to male members. Women would usually sit in my father's room after the master had joined other men in the big gathering/meditation room. Gradually, as more women were initiated into the order and the new building for the Sufi lodge was planned, a separate meditation room was built for women. I told my mother that as a child I always remembered that some women had a hard time sitting silently in the meditation room. In fact, the comparison between the men's and women's rooms had become a point of criticism for women's inappropriate behavior (talking instead of meditating) and their inability to understand/practice Sufism. My mother offered a very sharp analysis.

— Parvaneh: It was true that women were finally given their own meditation room. But this was not enough. The master, the shaykhs, the Sufi elders of rank and file were in the male gathering room. The women were left to their own devices. There was no system, no structure, no immediate guidance in the women's gathering room. They could hear the men in the other room, as if they were eavesdropping. There was no real participation. Some women had a strong connection with their master and could manage without his physical presence. But most women, like most people, need that participation, that interaction with the master and the elders. That is how they learn, how they begin to understand. But women were left out of this process for a long time. Their path was more difficult and challenging.

Checking my mother's analysis against my memories of growing up in the Sufi house in

Tehran, I think she is right as far as women's gathering in the separated meditation room was concerned. However, there were still spaces within the segregated Sufi compound that created a better sense of participation and interaction among women. One such space was the Sufi house kitchen, especially at the time of large gatherings. Women and men who were assigned service duties (*ahl-i khedmat*) would gather in the kitchen to help with the meal preparations. Khanum Hakim Elahi, an older Sufi woman who had been working in the Sufi lodge since the time of the previous master, Munes Ali Shah, was in charge of the kitchen. I remember that for many people serving in the kitchen (especially for women) Khanum Hakim was a role model. Her discipline, her focus, her kindness and respect towards others, was important training for the many who worked with her. But I also remember that my mother was not part of that scene. The Sufi lodge kitchen was in another quarter, away from either the family space or the meditation rooms.

I probed my mother again about the differences between Sufism as practiced in the Zu'l-Riyasatayn household versus the Sufism that she came to know after my father assumed the spiritual leadership of the order. I wanted to know her sense of the changes and the differences in terms of what she identified as Sufism through the years. As she further explained:

— Parvaneh: To begin with the Zu'l-Riyasatayn family lived off a small income from their agricultural land. My uncle and my grandfather, who were shaykhs of the order, and Master Munes Ali Shah, none of them worked for a living. I remember that I always questioned that. I didn't think it was right. When Munes Ali Shah passed away, I was still living at the Zu'l-Riyasatayn household. I was not even betrothed to your father yet. That's when the quarrel over who would be his spiritual heir started. You see the spiritual leadership of the order had been in the Zu'l-Riyasatayn family for many generations. Many did not want your father, who was an outsider and a young man [only twenty-seven years old], to succeed Munes. But even then, I was defending him

because in my mind he had dedicated his life to this cause, he was doing things that none of them would or could do. All the books in relation to Sufism that were published at the time of Munes were published through your father's efforts. He was the one helping with writing, editing, and all the publishing aspects of it. Everyone knew that. He was also running the Tehran Sufi lodge all by himself. He would cook for the darvishes, clean the Sufi lodge, run errands, and publish books, all the while going to medical school. I really admired him. I had a number of suitors before your father, but I rejected them because education, employment, and dedication to a goal were important to me.

— Safoura: So education and employment were not important to the Zu'l-Riyasatayn family. But I assume that they were still dedicated to Sufism in their own way. How would you define their practice of Sufism at that time?

— Parvaneh: They were very religious, *shari'a* oriented. I remember during Muharam [martyrdom of Imam Hussein] they held prayers and sermons [*roze*] all day and night and they would cry all the time. Your father told me that once Munes Ali was doing a Muharam prayer which involved damning the killers of Hussein and his followers. He asked your father to join in and your father responded by saying, "I'm busy damning myself, I can't damn any other."

— Safoura: I also heard that Munes Ali would write amulets and prayers for people.

— Parvaneh: Yes, people would come to him for amulets and prayer charms and he would give them. Your father said that one time Munes had arranged for other people to come and help him write a special amulet called *Sharafe Shams*. It was supposed to be very powerful and it could only be written on a special night. Well, they did not show up and Munes was very upset. So, your father volunteered to help write the amulet. But he did not believe in any of that.

— Safoura: I know, he tried very hard to rid the Sufism of his time from all superstitious as well as Sharia'-oriented teachings. His aim was to return Sufism to the Khurasan school with the

teachings of Bayazid, Abu Sa'id Abu'l-Khayr, and Kharaqani. But you always had religious [Islamic] inclinations. How did that transition effect you personally? Were you challenged by that?

— Parvaneh: I still do my daily prayers. I always fasted too, until a few years ago when my health would not allow it anymore. But I was never into amulets and prayer charms. Gradually I think I have accepted some aspect of Shia Islam and have rejected others. Today I think that saying my *zikr* [God's remembrance, the repetition of the name of God] is better than doing daily prayers.

— Safoura: What does Sufism mean to you today?

— Parvaneh: It simply means love, loving others more than yourself. But you have to let go of many things.

— Safoura: Like what?

— Parvaneh: Your selfishness, your ego, your pride and vanity.

— Safoura: How does one do that?

— Parvaneh: God's Grace. No one can do that without His grace. But there is always guidance, there is always help. You just have to be willing to accept that guidance and act on it. You have to take the steps.

— Safoura: Can you explain that in terms of your own path? What was this path like for you?

— Parvaneh: Well, I also worked hard. I made a tremendous effort to live this life. It was not easy to live a communal life, with everyone playing his/her own tune.

— Safoura: But you made a great effort?

— Parvaneh: Yes, and I went through many trials and tribulations. It's not possible otherwise. I had some aptitude as well. But mostly I was able to adapt and adjust to the many ups and downs of this life. Of course, it would be easier if you could love others, and love what you were

doing. Loving is so important in all this.

— Safoura: Do you think you've had this love?

— Parvaneh: Yes, I think I have had it somehow from the beginning. I had love for others, people, animals, and plants. I loved them all. As I said, it was also God's grace, nothing but His grace. At the same time, I saw how dedicated your father was to this cause. Nothing was as important to him, not his family, not even his own needs and wants. It was impossible not to be affected by his love, devotion, and dedication to Sufism. Even now when I think of what he has done, it gives me goose bumps. [She falls silent for a few seconds.] I was by his side from the beginning when he was expanding the order in Iran and later in England and the United States. He started them with nothing but sheer dedication and work. He would save up some money, ask people for contributions, buy land, and start building brick by brick. He was always organizing a work trip for *darvishes*. Either he would send Mr. Niktab [one of his shaykhs] or go himself. All the Sufi lodges he built inside Iran he built from scratch with the labor force of the *darvishes*, who would use their vacation times and spare times to build them.

— Safoura: And he also expanded the order to the West, which must have been far more challenging for him and for anyone involved.

— Parvaneh: He didn't know many people in the West when he started. I was with him on his first trip to England and the United States, very difficult trips.

— Safoura: Yes, I remember the first trip to England. I was ten years old. Other families also traveled with us. Quite a few children. It would have been much easier if he had traveled with a smaller group and without children. [My mother laughs]

— Parvaneh: Well, this was my doing entirely. I would always insist that your father take the families with him on his trips inside and outside Iran. Every year for the New Year's

holiday we traveled with your father and other Sufi families to other cities. This was upon my insistence. Otherwise he would go with other Sufi men without taking the families. I went to the United States with your father for the first time in 1973. Then we went as a family to England in 1974. He made these trips to purchase Sufi lodges outside Iran and I insisted on going with him.

My father left Iran five months after the 1979 Islamic revolution. By then my older brother, my sister, and myself were already in the United States. My mother and two other brothers (both university students) remained in Iran. I asked my mother about staying behind. "Did you want to stay in Iran?"

— Parvaneh: No, I didn't. Your father thought I should stay for the sake of the people, the Sufis. He said they would lose hope otherwise. Plus, your two brothers were not willing to leave the country. So I stayed.

— Safoura: Those five years without my father were of course very difficult for you. I remember that you were very unhappy.

— Parvaneh: I didn't want to be separated from my husband, but many families after the revolution had scattered around the world. Many did not see their loved ones for many years. I was unhappy, but I also knew that in so many ways we were lucky. None of us were jailed or executed. I knew I had to be patient.

— Safoura: I remember that you visited my father in England twice before finally moving there.

— Parvaneh: Those visits were difficult visits. Your father was not happy. He didn't like to live outside Iran. He fell into depression in the United States and he finally moved to England. It was better for him. There were more Iranians in England and it was easier for people to come and visit him from Iran, Europe, or the United States. He also started to focus on writing again. But it

took a long time for him to settle down to the extent he could. In some ways, he never did.

In our next interview, I explored my mother's move to England and her adjustments to a new culture and new circumstances. She told me that in the first five years of moving to England, she was not quite settled there because she was still moving back and forth between Iran and the United Kingdom. She also told me that the set up in England was so different from what she was used to in Iran; there was no longer a physical division between the family house and the Sufi lodge. Her children were grown and no longer living with her. Instead, she was forced to live with other Sufi men and women under the same roof and in the same space. She was no longer in charge of the household. It was obvious that she felt left out and out of place.

— Safoura: When you moved to England you were fity years old I think?

— Parvaneh: Yes, around fifty.

— Safoura: Did you like England? Were you homesick a lot?

— Parvaneh: Well, at first I was going back and forth between Iran and England, a few months there, a few months here.

— Safoura: Was this your idea or did my father want you to visit Iran?

— Parvaneh: Both. The London Sufi house was crowded and I didn't have my space. It was difficult. In many ways going to Iran was a relief for me. Our family home in Karadj [outside Tehran] that your father bought for us before leaving Iran was spacious with a pool and a beautiful garden. Your brothers still lived there with their families.

— Safoura: And the *darvish*es would come and visit you there?

— Parvaneh: Yes, the *darvish*es would come wherever we were. Thank God for that. I was never alone.

— Safoura: When did you stop visiting Iran?

— Parvaneh: My last visit I think was around twenty-two years ago. The government confiscated my passport. They were putting pressure on me to get to your father. I had to stay for seven months. But as soon as I got my passport back I left and I have not returned since.

— Safoura: So, in a way you were forced to adapt to the new circumstances in England because you could not return to Iran?

— Parvaneh: Yes, but I also wanted to be with your father more than anything else, so, I persevered and accepted the communal life in England as difficult as that was. Can you imagine all these people living under the same roof competing for your father's attention twenty-four hours a day? It was crazy, but I somehow managed to stay sane through that.

I did not probe more with questions because it was obvious that she did not like to talk about her problems during that time. Instead we quickly moved on to the purchase of an old windmill with a huge plot of land in Oxfordshire near Banbury, England, which became my parents' residence after 1992. From what she told me, my mother was finally able to reclaim her position as my father's wife and partner during this move. One reason for this development was the fact that the new property was a long distance from London. People who lived in the London Sufi lodge had jobs and could not move easily. Some who accompanied my father temporarily had to eventually move back to London or find an alternative residence somewhere between Banbury and London. Whatever the reason, my mother once again could claim some privacy with my father. She could also gradually separate the family space from the communal space.

— Safoura: You still had a lot of visitors in The Old Windmill before my father died in 2008.

— Parvaneh: Yes, they would come from every corner of the United States, Europe, Asia, Africa.

— Safoura: So the communal life did not end after you moved to The Old Windmill, but it changed, especially for you.

— Parvaneh: And your father. He had more peace and quiet here. He could focus more on writing. He would see people as long as he wanted and he would then send them to work in the apple orchard or to do something else. There was always work in The Old Windmill.

— Safoura: Yes, my father always kept his *darvish*es busy with work. He didn't like people to be idle. Speaking of work, you were also very busy. Taking care of my father and his special guests, cooking for the *darvish*es, organizing the household affairs. In a way, in your sixties and seventies you became even more active than before. I remember that sometimes you complained about the work. [My mother smiles]

— Parvaneh: Yes, we're all humans with our limitations of course. But looking back I think those years were the best years of my life. I served your father and the Sufi community with the best of my ability. And I felt closer to him than ever before. He would hold my hands sometimes and say: "You and I are one, don't ever think you are separate from me." The love he gave me was worth the work and the difficulty.

My father died on October 10, 2008, after a long illness at the age of eighty-two. According to his will he was buried at The Old Windmill leaving instructions to have my mother buried next to him when the time comes. He also named my older brother Alireza Nurbakhsh as his successor. It took me a long time (five and a half years) to interview my mother about her life after my father's passing. Neither of us was ready to talk about it. Our loss was so deep, so disorienting.

— Safoura: Tell me about your life after my father's death.

— Parvaneh: Well the truth is that it is very difficult. Very difficult. His physical absence has left a huge hole in our lives. But I also believe that he is with us, he's with me all the

time. And what he worked for all his life is still here as well. The Sufi lodges he established are sanctuaries of love and service. I thank God for that, and thank God for the fact that Agha Alireza was able to shoulder this huge responsibility and continue his father's work. So really I can't be sad. I'm very thankful and happy to see his work bearing fruit, and to be part of this as long as I live.

— Safoura: It seems that you have accepted his death.

— Parvaneh: Yes, I have. Death is *Haq* [Truth]. It comes for us all. We have to accept it. I know that for some of the *darvish*es it has been very hard to accept his absence. I understand that. But I also tell them that every one of us has the responsibility to continue his legacy through love, kindness, and service. Besides, the last two years when he was sick he really did not want to be in this world anymore. He wanted to go.

— Safoura: Yes, I remember that. Looking back, do you have any regrets, Mom?

— Parvaneh: No, not really. I did what I did according to the best of my ability. Of course, there are times when I think that I did not understand your father well, I did not appreciate him enough. But these are passing thoughts. All I remember now is the love he had for me and for everyone else and I'm immensely thankful for that.

Subsection 2: Fatemeh Habibi Parsa Known as Mehri (a Sufi Poet)

I remember meeting Mehri joon when I was in elementary school, around eight or nine years old. I remember it very vividly (very unusual, as my memory of people is poor), because I was told she was a poet and a teacher. Poetry was my favorite subject and I was just starting to write poems around the same time. She was very kind and encouraging. Mehri joon was the same age as my mother. So, when I started seeing her in the Sufi house she was in her late-thirties early-fourties.

Over the years Mehri joon and I have bonded. Most of our adult interaction happened between 1992 and 2003 when I was living in Iran. She would come and visit me in Karadj and I would sometimes see her in her house in Tehran. During those years, I was also very active in the women's rights movement in Iran and would occasionally write articles for women's rights publications. She was one of the very few women in the Sufi community who followed my involvement and encouraged me to continue. In July of 2011, I saw Mehri joon at the *digjush* gathering in Banbury after many years. I always remembered her as an active, neat, skillful, and artistic woman, who at five feet, nine inches, towered over most women and men around her. Now for the first time I saw her bent and frail. Old age had crept up on both of us. Realizing the race against time, I seized the opportunity and asked for an interview. She graciously obliged.

This is what Mehri joon says about herself and her involvement with Sufism:

— Mehri joon: I loved reading *monajats* (devotional prayers) and fasting when I was younger. At dawn during the month of Ramadan, I loved to listen to *monajats*. Our neighbor had a radio and I would go to the yard and listen in. When I got older I fell in love with Hafez first and then Rumi. I also fell in love with my high school lit teacher because nothing spoke to me like poetry. Then when I was older I thought I was in love with Imam Ali. I thought he was a perfect human being, but later I was not sure. How could one love anyone more than God? Then, I had this life-changing experience as a young married woman. My first child was a year and a half old. I was wrongfully accused by my husband and his family of something I had not done and which was so removed from my character. I remember I was so crushed because, before this happened, I could swear by my husband. I believed in him, I trusted him. But then when this happened, I understood that I cannot put my trust in any human being. I turned to God completely and called on him genuinely and said "I only want you and no one else." So what happened made that detachment

possible for me. Years later I was a school administrator when I met Manijeh. She was not initiated yet, but her father was a Sufi. When I told her about my yearnings for God, she told me I should go to the Sufi lodge. That was the first time I learned about the Sufi lodges. I started going to their house and gradually I was invited to go to celebrations in the Sufi lodge. In one of the celebrations the master gave me two coins as I was leaving. I still remember the coins, they were so hot. I was drawn to him as a loving caring human being and that was the beginning of my discipleship. I was going to the Sufi lodge for a while when your mother asked me why I never asked to be initiated. I told her I did not think myself worthy enough for the task. But Khanum joon [the name *darvish*es use for my mother] told the master, and the master asked me to come for initiation. It happened rather fast. It completely changed my life. I had had so many questions, complaints, unanswered wishes, and desires. It put an end to my anxieties. It gave me peace and contentment, something that I was after for so many years. But, of course, it was also a gradual process, the more I traveled the path, the more I learned from the master [his writings] and his teachings, the more contentment I had, the more submission I had.

— Safoura: Your husband was not initiated then?

— Mehri joon: No, he was not initiated. He really had no interest. He would take me to the Sufi lodge and pick me up afterwards.

— Safoura: He did not object to your involvement?

— Mehri joon: No, he didn't. But I wanted him to come as well. And I would try to get him to come, trick him even. I knew he was a very industrious person, interested in acquiring new skills, and I would tell him there are so many people from all kinds of occupations with many skills and if he came he would learn something from them. He finally gave in to me and came to the Sufi lodge and got initiated. But he would always object to the way I immersed myself in the path and say

why are you so radical, why can't you be more like others here? But he was very self-disciplined; he would make objections occasionally, but he never stood in my way. He never made serious objections. The master told me my husband was a patient man.

— Safoura: When you came, how many women were in the *jamkhaneh* (the meditation room)?

— Mehri joon: Not many. Twenty women more or less. Much less than the men in the men's *jamkhaneh.*

— Safoura: Was the master accessible to you? Was it easy to see him? I mean the environment was very masculine and he sat in the men's *jamkhaneh*. Did you feel that as a woman you were excluded in some ways?

— Mehri joon: Yes, always; I always envied the men. I envied their physical proximity to the master. They could see him all the time. I even wrote a *quadrine* on that subject:

Even though I'm a woman, I have the aspirations [hemmat] *of a man*

In my heart, I have the fire of the Beloved's face

I'm not allowed in the community of hamnafasan [*friends]*

From the grace of God I have tears like rain

In those days I cried a lot. Whenever I felt I could not be among friends, with people who understand what I was going through, and I could not really be near my master, I would cry. But whenever I asked to see my master I would be given permission, and whenever I had the opportunity to be with him and the Sufi community, I would not hesitate, even if my husband could not come, say to the trips, I would take one of the kids and go. I was very revolutionary in that way, breaking traditions. My husband would complain about, too. He would say you're too independent when it comes to your involvement in the Sufi community. But I would tell him that's the way it is, because that's all I

care about. I don't want anything else, I don't ask for anything else, this is all I want, and you can't deny me this.

— Safoura: Did other people in the community also object to your ways? Did they also see you as a radical woman breaking traditions?

— Mehri joon: Yes, from the beginning I would give my poetry to the master and he would give the singers my poetry to sing and recite for the gatherings. Some men would always make fun of me and my poetry afterwards. Most of my poetry was love poetry and to them a woman had no business writing love poems. Sometimes I would also doubt my own feelings and question myself. Perhaps I was suffering from some kind of lack or deprivation that I was so attached or in love with my master. But after examining myself carefully I would come to the conclusion that this love is the love I was seeking all my life, a love that consumes you without any expectations. I wanted to experience that love, and I had finally. The last time I experienced that anxiety was when I wrote a poem and sent it to the master who was by then living in the United States [after the revolution]. I was so distressed afterwards that I fasted for three days and I was worried that the master would be displeased with me for expressing those feelings. But then I received a message from him that he had asked a *darvish* to write the poem in calligraphy and he had told him that he wanted to publish it in *Sufi Women*. That was the very last time I had any doubts.

— Safoura: What about the Sufi community? The master was not always available, of course. But there were other Sufis. Did you seek the companionship of other Sufis?

— Mehri joon: Yes, at the beginning it was very important to me to seek out Sufis with more experience on the path. At first I thought to join the women's gatherings outside the Sufi lodge. I thought because they were Sufis they would be different. But unfortunately, that was not the case. They were not really interested in Sufism, at least not in those gatherings at the time. They were

more focused on everyday life, cooking, knitting, clothes, and stuff. So I decided to seek out Sufi men instead. And I would try to find gatherings of Sufi men. Sufi men were more focused on spiritual experiences and they would talk about Sufism or read poetry.

— Safoura: Did you at all encounter Sufi women who were somehow exceptional and could act as role models for you?

— Mehri joon: Yes, but very few. Most women were not deeply involved in Sufism, they had a very shallow superficial view of Sufism. They were interested in dreams, miracles, or extraordinary happenings. Not in absolute love and selfless devotion.

— Safoura: When you look back, what was your idea of this path and how does it compare to your lifetime experience of the path?

— Mehri joon: It was freedom right from the start and the freedom gradually expanded. I say that in my poetry:

Az ghafas rastamo dar kouye to azad shodam

(*I escaped the cage and was freed in your district*)

I knew I could never get divorced from my husband. I knew I had to raise my children. So, my only opportunity for freedom, freeing myself from the shackles of this life, this world, was my spiritual life. There I could rise above it all.

Subsection 3: Ellie, Sufism after the Revolution in Iran (a Quiet Resistance)

I met Ellie at the Washington, D.C. Sufi lodge in the summer of 2014. She said that we had met before in a June *digjush* in Banbury, but I didn't remember her. I'm at a loss at big gatherings. They overwhelm me to the point that I don't remember much, except for a feeling of confusion and

discomfort. I like the fact that I don't have a history with Ellie. I did not even plan an interview with her. It was a chance encounter. I wanted to get a fresh perspective on Iranian women of my generation who found their way to the Nimatullahi Sufi order after the revolution. She is an educated woman, over fifty, who comes from an old and respected middle-class family. At the time of the revolution she was a young married woman pursuing a graduate degree in Paris. Like many young people of her generation she and her husband were caught in the idealism of the revolution promising democracy and after returning to Iran were imprisoned for political activism. Disillusioned with political activism and dissatisfied with the religious options she was offered in captivity, Ellie started looking for an alternative. After many years of searching (and participating in meditation classes), a friend took her to a Sufi lodge. Here is what she has to say about her process of initiation.

—Ellie: The first time I went to see the shaykh I was so full of myself. I had even brought my two books of translations with me to show off. I wanted him to know that I was smart and educated. He threw the books carelessly on the floor (where we were sitting) and said: "This is not a place for these things." Then he asked me if my husband was ok with me coming to this place and I said, "No, he isn't." He responded without hesitation: "You can't get initiated if your husband is against it." I was so upset, so angry. Wasn't I a person in my own right? Why did it matter if my husband agreed or not? It took me many years to understand that it mattered.

—Safoura: Why? Why do you think it mattered?

—Ellie: Well, it separates your path from your husband's. It leads to conflict, which is not good for anyone.

I smiled, thinking that I had known many male *darvish*es who had conflicts with their spouses over coming to Sufi lodges, but I had never known any men being refused because of that.

But I kept my thoughts to myself and urged Ellie to continue.

—Ellie: So my initiation did not happen right away. It took a few years.

—Safoura: Did you finally persuade your husband to agree to your initiation?

—Ellie: No, [she laughs]. I lied to the shaykh. I told him that my husband agreed.

—Safoura: How old were you?

—Ellie: Around forty.

—Safoura: So, what happened next? (I asked, intrigued.)

—Ellie: Well, I still didn't know why I was going to Sufi lodges, why I wanted to be initiated. Had I known, I would not have lied. As I said, I was still too full of myself. I did not understand selflessness. So, I left the Sufi lodge because I was looking for ways of becoming somebody. I also had to learn certain things about myself; I had to see my flaws, my problems, before I could enter any spiritual path in earnest. So, I left for six years and a lot happened during that time, the most important of which was my divorce.

—Safoura: What led to the divorce?

—Ellie: It was childish really. Both of us were experiencing what they call here [in American culture] a mid-life crisis. We were blaming each other for everything that was wrong or we thought was wrong with our lives. Neither of us was willing to compromise. It was a clash of egos. But looking back it also seemed necessary. As painful as it was for both of us, we needed that experience to grow up.

—Safoura: And you ended back on the path of Sufism?

—Ellie: Yes, but this time I was broken. I reentered with abjection and humility. I was ready to surrender. I was a different person this time.

—Safoura: So, the second time, did you know what you wanted? What did Sufism mean to

you this time?

—Ellie: It meant getting rid of me, my selfishness, my ego.

—Safoura: To what end?

—Ellie: To the state of harmony and union with the Truth. You can't have any understanding of the Truth otherwise.

I asked Ellie to talk about the community of women *darvishes* in Iran and what it felt like being part of that.

—Ellie: Public spaces in Iran are still mostly segregated. So when you entered the Sufi lodge you had your *chador* on (wearing a *chador* was something I could not get used to) and you went to the women's *jamkhaneh* [meditation room]. Around 50 to 80 women would gather regularly and at special ceremonies we would have as many as 300 to 400 women there. For the most part women sit silently in meditation and then the program starts with a short—no more than five minutes—recorded discourse of the late master, Javad Nurbakhsh, and singing of Sufi poetry. There is a little interaction among the women when the program ends but not much.

—Safoura: What did you think of the other women attending? What was their view of Sufism? I know that there was not much interaction, but what was your general impression?

—Ellie: Well, I think you could divide them up into different groups. One group is very religious [in their adherence to Islam]; for them coming to the Sufi lodge or going to the mosque is the same. It always puzzled me why they came to the Sufi lodge instead of going to the mosque because clearly they did not see a difference. The second group I would identify as "dependents," meaning that they just want a master or someone to tell them what to do. As long as they can cling to someone else for their problems, they are happy. Very few people are on the path for the path, that is to say they have a fundamental understanding of Sufism. I myself did not have any understanding

for years, until I came for the second time.

—Safoura: Did you have any guidance from the more experienced women on the path?

—Ellie: Yes, the second time I came I had the opportunity to get to know an older experienced woman and it was wonderful. When I came back she said to me: "You are a pet pigeon. You return home every time." But she never asked me about why I left and what happened to me all those years that I was gone. I would go to her house often. We had tea and sat together. What I loved was that we didn't talk much. Somehow her presence made me heal without any words. It was very simple and beautiful.

—Safoura: You said in our conversations that when you first came you saw yourself as an advocate of women's rights and the male-centered atmosphere of the Sufi house was difficult to digest for you.

—Ellie: Well, especially because the shaykh asked for my husband's permission to initiate me. That was a huge deal for me.

—Safoura: But somehow you persevered and stayed on.

—Ellie: I think if you're a true seeker you stay, or in my case you go away and come back. You have no other choice. Gender is a duality and like all other dualities in this world you have to deal with that.

—Safoura: But ultimately in Sufism you don't think that gender matters.

—Ellie: No, it does not matter. In the spiritual dimension no duality matters.

—Safoura: Do you think that the younger generations of Iranian women can overlook the fact that structurally at least Sufism is still male-centered? What do women outside the Sufi community think about this?

—Ellie: It's a very interesting question. Iranian women have been awakened since the

Islamic Revolution. They have put up the most formidable resistance to the Islamic regime that wanted to clad them in black *chadors* and send them back to the inner chambers of the house. I can't tell you how many classes, groups, gatherings that focus on self-knowledge are convened in the capital right now, and 90 percent of the participants, if not all, are women. Many of these classes and groups have a religious/spiritual bent. It seems to me that educated women in Iran right now are more interested in following spiritual paths outside their traditions. They seem to think that other traditions are more egalitarian. I remember having a discussion with a woman about Rumi in one of the meditation classes. I was trying to persuade her to attend a *Masnavi* class and she was telling me that to her Rumi is a misogynist and she cannot learn anything from him.

—Safoura: What was your argument?

—Ellie: That Rumi was the product of his age and it should not be held against him. Plus, plenty of classical writers were misogynists and we still read them and learn from them.

—Safoura: Do you think that the structure of Sufism inside Iran is changing at all?

—Ellie: When I left Iran two years ago it was still the same. Unfortunately, these things take a very long time. But outside Iran it's a different story. When I attend Sufi gatherings here in Washington or anywhere outside Iran I no longer think about my gender. We are all travelers on the same path trying to shed our egos and realize a much bigger Truth.

Section 4: Women's lived experiences in Sufi communities outside Iran

The year was 1992. After seven years of living in the San Francisco Sufi lodge I was getting ready to return to Iran with my husband and two small children. On our way back, we would visit my parents (Parvaneh and Javad Nurbakhsh) in the newly purchased Nimatullahi center at the Old Windmill,

near Banbury, England. An American *darvish* asked me if I was excited about going home. "You must have been homesick," he said. Instead of agreeing with him readily, I paused, trying to think what "home" meant to me. It was then that I had a profound realization: "Sufi communities are my home wherever I go," I said happily.

It's true that I spent my adulthood in two very different geographical and cultural locations, Iran and the United States, but I also spent those years (all of my life essentially) in Sufi communities wherever I lived. The experience for me was somewhat different as a woman but really the same as a traveling darvish. In the U.S. Sufi lodges, I no longer had to wear a *chador* or enter a separate space designated for women. Men and women sit together in the meditation room and freely converse after the session is over. Yet the meditation rooms look the same everywhere: Persian carpets on the floor, cushions and sheepskins around the room, pictures of the current master and the masters before him hanging on the wall with Persian calligraphies, verses from the Qur'an, rosaries, and other decorative pieces. The sessions start with the master's discourse, followed by Sufi poetry and music. Sufi teachings contain the same lesson of selflessness, loving kindness, and service.

As always, what fascinated me the most were the stories of initiation and the ways these individuals from different cultural upbringings engaged in Sufism and followed its rituals and teachings. The stories were as varied as human experience. This time I could hear men as well as women. For most, Sufism was an answer to a spiritual yearning they could no longer ignore. There were still some women who followed their spouses to the Sufi path, but rarely the other way around. A spouse's approval was not necessary for a woman's initiation. Most men and women interested in Sufism in the West were from an educated, professional, middle-class background who had some knowledge of Sufi stories and Sufi poetry. Occasionally a few men or women in need of psychological, social, or family services wandered in, but they were directed to the appropriate

services while at the same time receiving care and attention from the Sufi community.

I was also becoming gradually aware of the gender dynamic in the practice of Sufism outside Iran. I remember once translating for a visiting shaykh in San Francisco. I was in my late twenties. A young American woman had made an appointment to see the shaykh and inquire about Sufism. One of her questions related to gender. She asked if there were any women shaykhs in the order. The shaykh replied that there were not any simply because men were more interested in that role than women. "Unlike men," he said, "when women are attracted to the Source (Truth) they forgo everything and everyone. They no longer have any interest in coming back from that experience of unity and guiding others. In fact," the shaykh continued, "women have a better aptitude for Sufism than men." I do not think the American woman was satisfied with the answer. As far as I know she did not return. But the question and answer stuck with me and somehow informed my growing awareness of gender and power in all aspects of my life, including Sufism.

Expanding in the West, women's full participation in the ritual practices outside Iran represented a major egalitarian shift for the Nimatullahi Sufi order. For the first time women could sit with men in the *zikr* sessions presided over by the master or a shaykh. Women and men had the same kind of access to the master or a shaykh, could seek his company, converse with him, and even accompany him on trips. The question of women's exclusion from the hierarchical structure of the order was not as immediately evident in the Sufi communities in the West as it had been in Iran. From 1973 (the year the London Sufi lodge was purchased) to 1990 (when more than eleven Sufi lodges were established in the United States and Canada) there were no residing shaykhs in the new lodges in the West. The master and one of his shaykhs from Iran would travel to different lodges once a year. Gradually women assumed varying responsibilities in the lodges as *dudedar* (an older more experienced *darvish* in charge of serving tea and food), as *pir-i dalil* (an older experienced

darvish assisting the shaykh in his responsibilities), and as financial and legal experts (for which there was no title in the old Sufi vocabulary). However, from 1990 to 2000 at least six new shaykhs were appointed in the West; none were women. The first (and to this day the only) woman shaykh of the order was appointed in 2004.

Over the years, I have had many conversations in various Sufi communities in the West about whether or not gender plays a part in the structure and practice of Sufism. For most, the late master's maxim that "There is no distinction between women and men in Sufism" was enough to stop any further probing. To many women *darvishe*s, raising the issue of authority and hierarchy within the Sufi community was contrary to the fundamental message of Sufism. As in many spiritual traditions, the road to enlightenment is through demolishing and/or transforming your ego. The only power Sufism is interested in is the power residing in the Truth and not in the self. Many women would happily forgo the trappings of power. "Let men worry about the illusion of power," they say. However, in the last five years a few Western women have objected to the way women have been excluded in ritual practices like the *digjush*, where the older experienced men are invited (quite publically) to sit in proximity to the master. They have argued that the question is not about power but about validating women's experiences. I've already noticed a change in the last few *digjushes* I have attended. Both men and women are called upon to sit in proximity to the master.

To most women and men in the Sufi communities in the West, the gender question is not as critical as it is in Iran. Besides, members tend to believe that whatever remains to be addressed, is addressed gradually, organically, in response to the need of that particular community. The three interviews below give some insights into the practice of Sufism among a diverse population of women who adapt and interpret Sufism according to their social, cultural, and religious beliefs.

Subsection 1: Susan, A White Middle-Class, Educated American Woman (Gender and Submission)

Susan is in her sixties. I've known her for ten years now. We meet in Sufi gatherings in the United States or in England. She is an educated professional woman who lives in a U.S. city where there is no official Sufi lodge, although a few people gather in a house for Sufi sessions. What interested me most about Susan was the fact that until she came to our order in her late forties she had no prior knowledge of Sufism, and yet she was so comfortable, so at home with Sufism. I wanted to know what Sufism meant to her and how she negotiated the cultural terrain and the gender dynamic of the order and the community. I wanted to know why it seemed so easy for her to adapt this new culture.

Her path to Sufism was through Coleman Barks's translation of Rumi poetry. She was reading Rumi poetry on a plane one day when the person sitting next to her started a conversation about Rumi and Sufism. He was an American *darvish* of the order. Before they parted ways, he gave her information about the nearest Sufi lodge. She made an appointment at the lodge and spent a weekend with an American woman in charge of the lodge. She was then asked to fly to Washington, D.C., to meet with an Iranian shaykh of the order. Here is how she explains her experience:

—Susan: You know that sense of when they say the time is right and when God calls and attracts you, that you come? That's why even in my most confused or unclear times whenever I might think, "that's crazy, I'm out of here," the reality of what happened to me and how I was brought to where I was supposed to be is so profound. Because it makes no sense otherwise, like no sense. You know, I told you I was having this happy upper middle-class well-off adult life, but feeling like just a ripe fruit, waiting for something. I started to read poetry and I started to read Rumi and it was like this love, you know, this is really it. And I mentioned about my religious/spiritual

quest in my youth. I came to reject Christian doctrine on my own, totally on my own. Because I could not reconcile that Jesus was saying believe in me and you'll be saved and you'll go to heaven. It was like this selfishness is not the point. The point is just this totally existential love that has no conditions attached to it. That's what Jesus represented, but that was not what Christianity was about. So, I just sort of floated off and I sort of hovered in suspension for years. I married twice, I had a child, I had a career. But spiritually there was nothing there for me. So, when I started reading Rumi I also started reading Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, and I had this profound joyous experience. It was as if someone had just handed me the biggest gift of realization or affirmation. At the time that I'm reading this stuff and experiencing this cosmic connection somehow, my mother's Alzheimer's was advancing. It was very significant. We had to swoop in and take her from her house and put her in this locked unit. It was very hard. Just when I was coming back from that difficult trip with my mother, that's when I met a *darvish* on the plane. That is when I was sort of ready for my spiritual journey, to give myself to the unconditional love, to want to surrender myself to a bigger Truth. And then, when I went to see the shaykh, I rang the bell, I walk in, and immediately there is this flood of attraction. There is no need for words. And I get initiated.

Susan was familiar with my project of investigating gender in Sufism. I had talked to her many times about my research. She always listened attentively and responded with interest. But I had no idea what if any significance this research had for her. When we finally sat down for a formal interview it became clear to me that Susan did not attach much importance to gender in her experience of Sufism. This is how she explained it in our first interview:

—Susan: Even though I'm a baby boomer and all the stuff about women's lib played out in my youth, I never much identified with these issues. I never took them up. It's not like I was the other extreme, no, no, but I never had much thought, I never gave it much thought. I've had all the

experiences of women and men. I had men hit on me who are bosses and teachers. I've had all these experiences, so when I came to Sufism I had some authority issues, I had some surrender issues. But I don't think it's because I'm a woman that I have these issues. I mean I had this fundamental belief, I always had about Sufism; I have no doubt and I'm at home with the fact that the Sufism I know in our order with our master is totally egalitarian. There are forms and people are acting them out and they are people who culturally may be acting certain ways because they are what they are, but that's not what the master expects or Sufism expects. It's not built into it that way. It's not like only men can be shaykhs, or only men do this, or only women do that.

When I point out the fact that until now we have had only one woman shaykh in the order and in the hierarchy of the order men have been traditionally in positions of power and women were traditionally excluded, she explains her response in terms of "the readiness factor" and compares it to the order's tentative relationship to Islam and how that relationship has changed over the fifty years Javad Nurbakhsh was the master.

—Susan: It seems like the master pokes at these issues individually and maybe collectively. And there is a readiness factor individually and collectively about when and how you poke. I mean there is the issue of prayers. He did away with the prayers and there is the whole way in which we deal with Islam and not, so he could do away with this a long time before he did in terms of what it means and doesn't mean. It's a matter of readiness about when it happens.

—Safoura: So, in a way you think that the egalitarian aspect of Sufism does not parallel the social readiness for that.

—Susan: Perfectly said.

—Safoura: Let's think about it in a different way, this relationship that I perceive as gender relationship. How about in the gathering, in the Sufi lodges, in interaction between people in

the community? Have you noticed something that pertains to gender that you liked or disliked, or thought something about, or you noticed, or had a conversation about with other people? What is your sense of what's happening in the community?

—Susan: Of course, I noticed the master's lieutenants, and when I use that term it's in the context of *digjush* gatherings because it's like three hundred people, five hundred people, I don't know. You have to tell people where to sit or what to do, so it's sort of an authoritarian directing of people, and these are men and everybody snaps to. So, of course, I observe that it's the men who are orchestrating things. Beyond that I observe that there are just some differences between the Iranian men, and if they are older, the expectations of how they want to sit and where they want to be. And you can see how different Iranian women are acting or women in different cultures are acting, but I just observe it as just that.

—Safoura: So the dynamic of gender in the community does not bother you?

—Susan: No, it doesn't.

—Safoura: But you think in the next generation it's going to change?

—Susan: I bet you it's going to shift.

—Safoura: And you think that it is the Iranian culture that is translating Sufism in this way?

—Susan: Partly. I mean it's an interesting question about if and when in time you would have a complete manifestation of the divine unity and what it would mean in any kind of organization.

In my long conversation with Susan, I encouraged her to use anecdotes and stories to contextualize her remarks, but somehow our discussions became more theoretical and intellectual than the other interviews I did before and after. It seemed that she was really trying to engage the

issue of gender and whether or not it has any relevance to her experience of Sufism or other women's experience of Sufism. She readily admitted that at least in its structural appearance, in much of its discourse and history, Sufism was quite male-centered. Yet, she was still ambivalent as to whether one needs to challenge this male-centeredness and if so how. At one point she says:

—Susan: I mean it's a tricky business in being a disciple and then to have urges, urges to change things, urges to do things. I mean that's a whole dimension of Sufism that is so remarkably challenging, right? About how much individual action and assertiveness do you have versus guidance. How much is adherence to the way things are done essential to Sufism versus not.

At another time while we were discussing how women challenged the male-centeredness in other religious/spiritual organizations she added:

—Susan: Well, how are you going to do it? You go to the master and say, "I think you should make me or someone else a shaykh because we need a female shaykh" [She laughs] That's how the priests, the women priests did it, right? In the Episcopal Church and other churches, right? They basically asked for it, and that's because in those places the path to the priesthood is different; it's because it's basically like going to college, you sign up and say I want to do it and, yes, you have to get accepted, but it's an easier process to get accepted. And then you pay your dues, you apprentice, you do different things.

Although I did not agree with Susan's assumption that including women in the hierarchy of other religious organizations was somehow easier than in Sufism, I was quite familiar with the conflict and contradiction of surrendering to a master and questioning his decisions. On the other hand, Susan told me many times that what I was doing was important. In fact, she saw my project as evidence that the gender dynamic in our Sufi community is inevitably changing as more educated contemporary young women join the order. In our last conversation, she told me that a young

woman in her twenties recently made an appointment to talk to her about Sufism and that she somehow felt that it was important that she was the point of contact for her as opposed to a man. It seemed that the young woman felt "safer" and it was easier for her to open up to an older woman. Susan said, "There is something about the timing right now that feels like Sufi women's visibility (to the extent that Sufis are ever visible) matters, because it matters for Sufism to be alive in our world and to be relevant."

Subsection 2: Mary, An Educated West African Woman Living in the United States (Respecting all Beliefs)

I have known Mary for over ten years. She is in her late fifties and has five grown children. She came to the United States with her husband in the early 1980s. She is a regular at the Sufi lodge near her home and almost never misses a meditation session. She is also the first person to volunteer for any service inside and outside the Sufi lodge. Her loving demeanor, her dedication to service, and her serenity and surrender have endeared her to anyone who knows her. Although I knew of many difficulties she faced in her life (mainly from her three children who were also initiated into the order), I never heard her complain of anything. I asked Mary about her early upbringing in West Africa and her eventual encounter with Sufism. Our interview was conducted in English which to some extent limited the scope of our conversation. Although Mary is fluent in English she is not as comfortable with English as she is with French, the official language of her country.

—Mary: I was born in Benin, in Porto-Novo, in West Africa. Born in a Christian family and was raised mostly by my mother and my aunt on my father's side. And taught a lot of values like humility and service, and they taught me these values by example.

—Safoura: So, you were raised a Catholic?

—Mary: Yes, until I got married.

—Safoura: How old were you when you got married?

—Mary: I was twenty-six when I got married and converted to Islam.

—Safoura: Was it your choice to convert to Islam?

—Mary: That's a good question. It was first my husband's choice and I wasn't obliged to follow it. But I came to the conclusion that I could worship God that way too. In the end what mattered was God.

—Safoura: You didn't see that much of a difference between being a Christian and being a Muslim.

—Mary: Exactly. I didn't see that much of a difference, because of, also, the way I have been raised. We have been living with Christians, Animists, and Muslims in the same neighborhood and sharing the same values. People never fought. They were friendly to each other. So for me having Christian relatives, having Muslim relatives, and Animist relatives was normal. And that normalcy made me understand Sufism better. When my husband was translating *Jesus in the Eyes of the Sufis* and I was typing up the manuscript, I was really touched by all the wonderful things Sufis were saying about Jesus. I had already seen some Muslims, not in West Africa but in the United States, who had no respect for the Christians at all. But when I saw Sufis accept all faiths, love all human beings regardless of their race, religion, or background, that really moved me.

—Safoura: Do you identify as a Muslim?

—Mary: Not only as a Muslim but as someone who believes in the Sufi doctrine of the Unity of Being. I try to see beyond divisions and focus on our shared humanity. It happens sometimes that I have to go to the mosque for some reason, or to the church, for someone's funeral or a ceremony. I respect them all because I know that we worship the same God in different ways.

So, for me religious differences are not very important. What is important is to love God and serve others.

—Safoura: So, if someone who did not know anything about Sufism asked you to explain it, how would you define Sufism?

—Mary: It has nothing to do with any religion. It has nothing to do with doing prayers or rituals. It's serving others in whatever way you can. It's not only going to places and helping people. It's also simple things: it might be a smile, it might be calling someone who is alone. All those little things make a difference. I'm just beginning to understand the importance of service.

Mary's answers were surprising to me. I assumed that, like her husband, Mary was a religious person who identified with Islam closely. I also realized that all these years I have not heard Mary express her opinions about anything. She has a very comforting presence and she likes to volunteer her time for service, but she does not talk about what she believes or what she thinks. This made me think about the question of visibility versus invisibility in the Sufi community in a new way. Like any other concept, visibility and invisibility are not absolute values, but nuanced and graded. Mary's visibility was initially based on her presence and actions. Her opinions and thoughts gave a new dimension to her visibility. I wondered whether this divide also to some extent explained the treatment of gender in Sufi texts: women's presence versus men's thoughts.

I asked Mary about the gender dynamic in the religious/spiritual communities in Benin and the United States.

—Mary: Being raised in a patriarchal system where men have all the rights, it is difficult for women to have their space, even in religion. Women have their role. I mean their place, separate, distant from men. And women cannot take that much initiative, in any case, besides being in the house and taking care of the household. But besides that, in the sphere of religion she has to take a

back seat. Whereas, when I came here to the United States, there is no distinction between men and women. When I came to the Sufi lodge everybody was equal. We sit together, we meditate together, and we work together. I never think of myself as a woman in the Sufi lodge but as a spiritual traveler like everyone else.

Understandably, Mary's assessment of gender equality in the U. S. Sufi houses was based on her experiences of gender inequality in West Africa. When I brought some of the inequalities of gender in the Sufi communities in the United States to her attention (the number of women in positions of authority versus the number of men, for example), Mary agreed that these inequalities existed, but like Susan she was very optimistic that the new generation of men and women will bring new values of gender and ultimately create a more egalitarian community.

Subsection 3: Lola, From Jamaica to Canada to the United Kingdom (Race and Gender in Sufi Communities)

I've known Lola for more than ten years now. I see her whenever I go to *digjushes* in Banbury and sometimes when I visit my mother in England. She was in her late fifties at the time of the interview, but she has always looked younger than her age, with a lot of energy and vibrancy. She has a carefree joyful appearance even when she is working hard at an assignment in a Sufi lodge. She is also a very skilled conversationalist. She enjoys meeting people and talking to them about various subjects. Upon discovering my interest in feminism, Lola engaged me in many animated discussions about race and gender. Before sitting down for a formal interview with her, I had very little knowledge of Lola's background and upbringing.

Lola was born to Jamaican immigrants in the United Kingdom in the 1950s. Both of her parents were educated. Her mother was from upper-class Jamaican society and her father was from a

landlord class. Emigrating to the United Kingdom in the 1950s, however, in what Lola describes as the height of racism, was in many ways a rude awakening. Her mother was not admitted to university even though she had passed the entrance exam in Jamaica. Her father had to settle for a job as a bus driver. Like many immigrants, Lola's parents had lost their status and class privileges in the host country. But what was more unsettling was the experience of racism not only for themselves but for their children. Lola remembers her first memory of what racism meant to her and how it forced her parents into finally responding to the crisis.

—Lola: One day, I was about five or six, I came home from school and I was in tears and asked my dad to paint me white. I was frantic and I was inconsolable. They said that there's just no way that we can paint you white, and I said, "Well, if you love me, you can paint me white. After all, you're my parents. Why can't you do it?" and they said that from then on it was really heartbreaking and they could not explain to me that that's not something that would be possible.

The experience of the young Lola finally convinced her father that they needed to go somewhere that racism would not dominate their lives. He started to study part-time and finally emigrated to Canada with an engineering degree. His family joined him after a year. By the time they all emigrated to Canada, Lola, the oldest of six children, was ten years old.

Although according to Lola, the racial atmosphere in Canada was not as toxic as it was in the United Kingdom, racism to some extent still informed the experience of a black family living in a predominantly white neighborhood. Moreover, Lola's mother had internalized some of the racism she had acquired through her culture in Jamaica, without even recognizing it as such. She admired lighter skin colors, smaller noses, and smooth straight hair, the features her oldest daughter never possessed.

Unsurprisingly, when I ask Lola about her experience of faith growing up, she ties that

experience also to the experience of racism. She said her parents started out as religious people. They were Baptists and when they were in Jamaica they would go to church twice a week. They knew their scriptures by heart. This all changed once they migrated to the United Kingdom and saw the violence of racism. They lost their faith in the God who would allow such injustice. They started to read about colonization and to think that Jesus was the white man's God. He was a white man with blue eyes (even though he was born in the Middle East) and protected the white people.

What this meant for Lola was that not only was she not indoctrinated in any religion, she was brought up with a degree of skepticism and distrust of any faith. In fact, when I finally ask Lola to tell me her story of initiation, her combative, resistant personality takes center stage. At the time Lola was a 35-year-old single woman living and studying in Japan. She was part of an expatriate community in Japan that is both very diverse and at the same time spiritually oriented, meaning that the majority of people are looking for a spiritual path. A married couple from this community somehow stumbled on the Sufi path while visiting London by finding a book by my father and making an appointment to see him. They got initiated and upon returning they asked other people to join their meetings and listen to the discourses of the master. Lola attended for a few months rather reluctantly, hoping that the path would eventually grow on her. But feeling that it was not working out she eventually left. A year or so later Lola had to travel to San Francisco to help a friend with a medical condition. Her travel companion learned that a Sufi shaykh was visiting the Sufi lodge in San Francisco, made an appointment to see him, and after her first visit brought Lola with her to the lodge. This is how Lola describes her first experience at a Sufi lodge:

—Lola: So, we get there and it was awful. The room was full of smoke. This is the early 90s. You know, nobody was smoking outside. And I couldn't breathe and I kept coughing and coughing. And I said to my friend, "Why would you bring me here? You know I don't smoke." She

goes, “Yeah, I know, I know, it’s OK.” Anyway, I sat down on the floor thinking, this is more Persian than our sessions in Tokyo. Christ, this is gross, you know? Like there was no affinity for this place at all. I didn’t want to be there, it was uncomfortable. I just wanted to eat the food and go. Anyway, I’m sitting on the floor cross-legged, really thinking, why am I here? And this person comes to me, and he’s got green socks on, and he’s got holes in his socks. I thought, well, that’s it. This guy is definitely a loser. Anyway, I took the tea and didn’t drink the tea, because I thought, you know, it’s probably poisoned, because he’s got holes in his socks, you know?

So, then we were told that the shaykh can see us now. And I was like dreading it. We go into this room and it was like no other room that I had ever seen before. This guy was like Santa Claus, sitting there with his long beard, his long hair, in complete white, with this brown thing sitting on his head, which I later realized was the *taj* (a hat worn by Sufi members of the Nimatullahi order).

I sit there and the room is so peaceful. It’s like we’ve gone into another world. I mean, you could hear the noise, but once the door was closed, the music, everything just drowned out. It’s like we were in this lovely cocoon. And I sat there thinking, well, this is really bizarre. And he was sitting cross-legged, and he’s playing with these large yellow beads, you know, just doing whatever he’s doing. So, he started to ask questions via a translator (the guy with the holes in his socks). And he goes, “Well, okay. So, tell me a little bit about your life.” So I told him, just chitchat.

And then I put my hand up, and I said, “Well, I’m kind of looking for something, but I don’t know what I’m looking for.” And, “You know,” I said, “I’ve been starting to go to church in Japan, and I’ve been doing some meditation, so I’m a little bit confused. I don’t know what I want to do.” And he goes, “Okay.”

And then I notice again the big beads that he was playing with. And I had never seen them before, because again, I’d never been in church, I’d never seen a rosary. So I put my hand up like

this, just raising it slightly above my head like I'm a little kid. And he goes, "Yes?" And I said, "What are you playing with?" My friend just about dropped down dead, just totally embarrassed, totally ashamed that her friend doesn't know what a rosary is. And then the guy translated and the shaykh just started to laugh, and he laughed, and he was almost really falling over, almost touching the floor. He was holding his stomach. And then the translator starts to laugh, and then my friend laughed. Well, I'm thinking, it's just a question, I don't understand why this is funny. And I'm waiting for them to stop and, you know, he's rubbing his eyes, and as he's trying to stop he would start to howl again. The more he howled, the more the translator howled. The more he howled, the more my friend laughed. I was feeling really, really uncomfortable at this point, like, could someone tell me the joke? Is there some Sufi joke here? And finally, the shaykh said, "You're right. I'm only playing." That was it.

So, we left the room and I was still baffled. I don't know what it was. So, we left the room, and I swear we went back into the same room. It was as if somebody had taken out all of the smoke. They came in and vacuum-cleaned it up, sucked it out. There was no smoke. The music suddenly sounded quite beautiful. The people's faces looked happy, where I was thinking they were all snarled and ignoramus, you know, because they're mostly all Persian. No white people's face, no black people's faces, you know. And I sat on the floor and I looked around and I thought, I don't know what happened. So, I called the guy with holes in his socks and said I'd like to be initiated, and that's how it started. [Here is the end of Lola's long quote.]

I like Lola's story of initiation not only because of the colorful way she relates it, but also because of the way it captures the encounter with something very foreign and different. Moreover, unlike Susan's story there is no instant attraction here. Instead there is a series of resistance and rejection that gets resolved only in a very gradual and unexpected process. Even after her initiation

Lola has to go through many ordeals and tribulations in order to fully integrate into the Sufi community with some level of comfort and understanding. She told me that at the beginning she would come and visit the master in England for two weeks every year, not knowing really what she was supposed to be doing there and what was expected of her. Only ten years later, after she married a British *darvish* and moved to England, did she finally have the opportunity to be part of a Sufi community and experience the Sufi training under a master.

Another important aspect of Lola's experience is the fact that from the beginning she had no interest in learning about Sufism through books. For her a spiritual path was a lived and embodied experience that could not be understood in words. When I asked her to attempt to define what it was, she said:

— Lola: The best thing I can come up with is to learn how to serve through the embodiment of loving kindness. The ultimate goal is nothingness, is union with God, but if you ask me what that means I cannot really tell you because I have not experienced it. I know it as an ideal, but I have not experienced it.

When I finally asked Lola to talk about her experience of gender in the Sufi community she tells me that her experience of gender cannot be separated from her experience of race. "I'm a black woman. My experience of gender was profoundly different from the experience of the white women in the community." When I ask her to elaborate she says that most of the sexism and racism she has experienced were in relation to the Iranian *darvish*es visiting the master from Iran. From the point of view of the Iranian Sufi community Lola felt that she was an anomaly, especially because she lived in the Sufi lodge in close proximity to the master and was given some responsibility of service in the community. In other words, she felt that somehow the master had made her visible in the community and that was difficult for the Iranian *darvish*es to accept. There were other black women in the

community who would occasionally visit the master, but none of them were a fixture in the community of Sufis around the master. However, Lola did not think that sexism and racism were part of the culture of Sufism. Rather she attributed these discriminatory tendencies to the people and their socialization in Iran.

This, however, did not mean that Lola was unaware of the masculine appearance of Sufism in its structure and/or somehow it did not matter to her. In fact, she told me that from the beginning she questioned the fact that there were no women shaykhs in the order and that in the ritual ceremony of *digjush* men with more experience on the path were called out publically to sit in a circle closest to the master. She says:

—Lola: At the beginning sometimes when I had a question I would ask "Is there a woman I could go to?" and they would say "Well, there are no women shaykhs in the order." But I wanted to have a woman role model, and people would say that it doesn't matter whether you have a woman role model or a man. But for me it did matter. It mattered in what they would say to you and how they would communicate with you….This changed at least in a symbolic way when we had our first woman shaykh in the order, and the fact that I was here at the time and witnessed it made it even more powerful for me. The whole thing was so unadorned, unassuming, and simple. She [the first woman who would become a shaykh] goes in and tells master there are some people in Holland who want to become initiated but they cannot make the trip to England and she goes, "Master, what should I tell them?" and the master says, "Go ahead and initiate them." And she comes back after only spending a couple of minutes with the master in a total daze not knowing what just happened. And I'm the only person there and she tells me what has just happened and she goes in the second time to make sure she had heard the master correctly and he just says: "Yea, yea, initiate them." And that's just it. Not that I was really agitated about seeing a woman shaykh, but it somehow took the

pressure away from my desire to want to see women in that role. Because I sort of understood that it was not a big deal while it is a big deal, and when the timing is right it happens.

Section 5: Conclusion

I started this ethnography project with multiple aims in view. First, given that the bulk of my dissertation concerns the treatment of gender in the textual medieval discourse of Sufism, which focused mostly on men's experience of Sufism, I wanted to somehow balance this lopsided view by recording and preserving women's lived experiences in the contemporary Sufi community. Second, I aimed to explore and analyze the gender dynamic within the Nimatullahi Sufi community and the challenges it posed to the contemporary women who practiced Sufism for more than ten years. Third, I hoped to understand the significance and impact of the medieval culture of Sufism (either textual or orally transmitted) for contemporary women in Sufi communities. I wanted to know to what extent the male-centeredness of the medieval Sufi culture and discourse of Sufism plays a part in women's day to day practice of Sufism and whether or not it mattered to them.

Growing up in Sufi communities in Iran, I already knew that women faced more challenges in these communities where male privilege was sanctioned and normalized by the cultural, religious, and institutional systems. However, in the interviews I have conducted, what becomes more apparent is the resilience of these women and their ability to carve spiritual spaces that would fit their aspirations in spite of numerous restrictions. Both Parvaneh and Mehri belong to the generation of Iranian women ushered into modernity by compulsory unveiling and public education. Staying safely within the traditional boundaries of gender (getting married, having children, pursuing a modest career as an elementary school teacher) they nevertheless find ways of pushing against the

limits whenever they can or whenever they have a cause. For Parvaneh, pushing against the limits is standing up for the rights of the families (her own and other families) in the Sufi community. She makes sure that families are included and counted on the path to the higher Truth. Parvaneh carves her space in the Sufi community by sheer perseverance and optimism. Many of the women I interviewed for this project, Iranians and non-Iranians alike, see her as a role model, a woman who embodies Sufism in her mannerism and her outlook in life. Mehri on the other hand, a passionate Sufi poet, longing for the company of her master and other Sufis, is not afraid to seek the company of Sufi men or to follow her master in his travels even when her husband is unable to accompany her. She expresses her love, fully and freely, in her lyrical love-poems, which are sung in the Sufi houses in Iran alongside the poetry of Rumi and Javad Nurbakhsh. Finally, Ellie, who belongs to a new generation of Iranian women, acutely aware of gender inequality and resisting it in any way possible, refuses to give up her interest in Sufism because of the male dominance of the structure and the discourse. She lies about her husband's approval of her engagement with Sufism in order to become a full-fledged member and gradually, with the help of more experienced Sufi women, she learns about submission and acceptance in her own terms.

As to the significance and impact of the medieval Sufi discourses on women's lives, all women (Iranians and non-Iranians) recognized the invisibility of women in the history and discourse of Sufism to some extent and explained it as a culture of male dominance that goes beyond Persian/Iranian culture and is gradually changing in contemporary times. One of the questions I asked the women I interviewed was to name five Sufi men and five Sufi women in the history of Sufism. I posed this question not only to the women whose interviews I have included in this chapter but also to a sample of thirty women in the Sufi community. Most women were able to identify five Sufi men without much delay and pondering (Bayazid, Abu Sa'id, Attar, Hallaj, Junayd, Ibrahim

Adham, Rumi, Shams Tabrizi, Kharaghani, Javad Nurbakhsh were some examples they named). Even Lola who had very limited textual exposure to Sufism could readily name Rumi, Araqi (a thirteenth-century Sufi poet), and her master as three Sufi men. However, when trying to name Sufi women, except for the famous Sufi saint Rabi'a al-Adawiyya, the women I interviewed had no other names in their list. Many cited my mother (Parvaneh Daneshvar) as the only other Sufi woman and a contemporary role model they could name. This small exercise prompted many discussions about women's invisibility in Sufi discourses and whether or not it mattered. Some women I interviewed found women's invisibility a privilege and a blessing. They argued that since "nothingness" is the ultimate goal of Sufism, visibility is an "ego trap." Others, like Susan and Lola thought that having a woman role model is important. Interestingly enough, the women I interviewed were not as much interested in the history of women's involvement in Sufism as they were in its contemporary or future development.

Without exception, all the women I interviewed were aware of the changing dynamic of gender in the Sufi community and welcomed it. Ironically, even women who saw visibility as an obstacle on the path were interested in women's full participation in the rituals and structure of Sufism. All of them saw the change as an organic development happening gradually but perceptibly without a need for activism or a vocal protest. Like Susan, all the women I interviewed saw Sufism as an egalitarian system of belief, which has been influenced by discriminatory practices and ideas of the time without really being defined by them. According to them, the principles of service, loving kindness, and selflessness cannot be practiced with exclusions and discriminations and the discourses of Sufism have many examples testifying to this fact.

Finally, and most importantly, the interviews in this chapter are now part of the scant and scarcely available recorded history of women's participation in Sufism. They provide us with some

historical accounts of women in the Nimatullahi Sufi communities in Iran and elsewhere from the twentieth century to the present time. Parvaneh Daneshvar's interview in particular sheds light on the practice of Sufism at the time of Munes Ali Shah and its transition to the time of Javad Nurbakhsh, while giving us a view of gender dynamics and women's roles and participations in the Sufi lodges. Ellie's interview records the challenges of women after the Islamic revolution that to some extent imposed more restrictions on women while at the same time prompting them to fight for their equality and to seek spiritual spaces that offered them more freedom and autonomy. Susan, Mary, and Lola all give us varying accounts of how women outside Iran and unfamiliar with the Sufi tradition find themselves attracted to the path and adapt Sufism as a way of life. They also provide us with some understanding of how non-Iranian women living in the West negotiate gender in the Sufi communities and change its dynamic.

[1] The three interviews with Iranian women of the Nimatullahi Sufi community (Parvaneh, Mehri, and Ellie) were conducted in Persian. Later I translated and edited the interviews. The three interviews with the non-Iranian women of the Nimatullahi community (Susan, Mary, and Lola) were conducted in English. For the sake of clarity, I have edited all interviews and omitted repetition of words, pauses, interruptions, or any material that was either not relevant to our conversation or else confidential in nature.

[2] At the request of Persian visitors of the master, Reza Ali Shah sent his disciple Ma'sum Ali Shah to Persia. In the course of Ma'sum Ali Shah's extended stay in Iran, from 1184/1770 to 1212/1797, he reignited the passion of Sufism in many Persian communities. As the number of Nimatullahi followers increased in Iran (as many as 60,000 followers by one account), Ma'sum Ali Shah and the small circle of his most devoted followers were driven from town to town. Eventually Ma'sum and three of his devoted disciples were killed by Aqa Muhammad Ali Bihbahani, the Mujtahid of Kermanshah, and another was stoned by the order of Mullah Abdullah in Kerman.

[3] Nasrollah Pourjavady and Peter L. Wilson, *Kings of Love*, (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1978), p. 140.

[4] Javad Nurbakhsh, *Discourses* (London/New York: KNP 1996).

Chapter 6: Conclusion: Reconciling Feminism and Sufism

> Since in the Ocean of Divine Unity (*tawhid*) neither "I" nor "you"
> exists, what possible meaning can "man" or "woman" have?
>
> Javad Nurbakhsh, *Sufi Women, 2004*

In the Fall of 1998, around the time that I was starting to find ways of reconciling my spiritual yearning with my feminist interest, a Sufi friend sent me a copy of Carol Lee Flinders' recently published book, *At the Root of this Longing: Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger and a Feminist Thirst,* with this note: "Here is another woman in another spiritual tradition grappling with the same issues."

Flinders's book was one of the most important theoretical articulations of the challenges of reconciling spirituality and feminism in a contemplative practice. Flinders identified five areas of dissonance among meditative spiritual practice and feminism: silence, selflessness, resisting desire, enclosing oneself, and turning inward. Flinders argued that these practices were constructed in opposition to male privileges that included speaking freely, indulging one's ego, enacting upon one's desire, and moving without restraint. The feminist challenge to spiritual practice was therefore the recognition that a spiritual journey requires a deliberate choice of giving up privileges that are denied to most women. As women still fight to find their voice, reclaim their desire, and move about freely and fearlessly, how can they embark on a serious spiritual journey which continues to be defined in male terms?

In the present dissertation, I have offered a glimpse into the ways in which Persian Sufi discourses consolidated male privilege, constructed Sufi woman as an exception, and overall

minimized women's participation in Sufi communities and histories. I have also highlighted the traces of Sufi women in the foundational texts of Sufism and suggested ways of re-interpreting Sufi narratives to restore woman's spiritual equality in Sufism. However, the question I would like to expand and explore at the end of this long discussion, especially after conducting many hours of interviews with contemporary Sufi women in the Nimatullahi community, is the fundamental question that Flinders raises in her book about the eventual compatibility of feminism and contemplative spiritual practices such as Sufism. Does feminism stop at the gate of spiritual initiation? If as many mystics have declared, identity (the "I" and "you") is but a mirage, why insist on feminism's importance to spiritual practice?

In the spring of 2016 I had the privilege to interview Carol Lee Flinders for the special issue of *Sufi*, a biannual journal of mysticism published by the Nimatullahi Sufi order, on gender and identities in spiritual practice. My friend and co-editor, Mary Gossy, professor of gender studies at Rutgers University, also participated in this interview/conversation. The question that was raised time and again during the discussion was whether or not gender/sexual identities matter in serious spiritual practice. The responses were formulated in relation to two aspects of spiritual practice: the communal and the individual.

From the communal perspective, all of us agreed that spiritual communities not only are "enriched," as Mary Gossy put it, by the inclusive outlook of feminism, and its embracing of gender, sexuality, class, and race differences, but also, since the kind of spirituality we believed in could not be practiced outside the world of social interactions, feminism was an important social tool for dealing with the real power struggles and inequalities that exist in the outside world. Again, as Mary Gossy so aptly put it, "the problem is that the street comes along into the practice center [or a Sufi lodge]." Throughout my dissertation, I have shown that the challenges posed to women in the

practice of Sufism are often part of the social, cultural, and religious norms of the time and place they live. Women and children on the rooftops of *khaniqahs* in Abu Sai'd's time remind us that women often did not have the time and space required for spiritual meditation and introspection. In fact, as my ethnography chapter makes clear, the creation of a meditation room for women in the Nimatullahi Sufi community was a late development precipitated by the advent of modernity in Iran. Similarly, due to religious and cultural segregations and prohibitions, women's participation in *sama*' rituals have been a controversial topic since the beginning of the Sufi practices and continue to pose problems to Sufi communities in countries like Iran where religious fundamentalism has a strong hold. Although as I illustrated in my ethnography chapter, the expansion of Sufism in the West and outside its traditional boundaries has provided welcome opportunities for re-examination of gender constructs and has increased women's role in the organization of the Nimatullahi Sufi order, this late development is still quite gradual and has not yet produced more than one woman shaykh.

In a way, what I have begun with this dissertation, to a large extent, is a feminist intervention at a communal level. We need to re-examine and re-interpret the medieval discourse of Sufism to make the current practice of Sufism compatible with our contemporary social and psychological understanding of what constitutes human identity and human society. We need to constantly remind ourselves that the inner journey takes place as part of the human journey in time and place. Spirituality cannot be divorced from social historical specificities. Yet, this dissertation is only a beginning. Much work is ahead of us to address the differences of sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, and nationality in Sufi communities.

From the individual perspective, on the other hand, the importance of gender identity and feminist intervention still proved to be challenging. On the one hand, focusing on gender identities in

spiritual paths like Sufism run contrary to the aim of shedding identities and illusions of selfhood. Flinders came close to identifying the heart of the matter when she responded: "I think it depends entirely on how you feel about it. How big a place it has in your own consciousness. How hard your experience has been because of what you had to endure for your gender identification. That has to be individual." The way I would reword or interpret Flinders' response is to take up the question of choice that Flinders also raises in her book. If spiritual journey has been defined as male privilege and if women were often denied the choice of surrendering privileges of autonomous selfhood, it is understandable that for some women the inward journey of self-discovery entails claiming selfhood before negating it. In other words, for some (perhaps many) women, a feminist awareness is a necessary step towards self-knowledge and the eventual surrender of self to the bigger Truth.

Another aspect of a feminist spiritual awareness is a construction of a spiritual genealogy. As Flinders observes: "Women who are engaged in serious meditative practices have everything to gain by connecting with one another—within our communities." For years, growing up in Sufi communities, the only Sufi woman offered as a role model was Rabi'a al-Addawiya, who, as I explained in my third chapter, exemplified a confusing and at times contrasting mosaic of characteristics. Time and again I heard from the young women embarking on the Sufi path the need to identify with a Sufi woman role model. This dissertation among other things is an attempt at constructing a feminist genealogy of Sufism. It aims to give Sufi women an assurance that they are part of a community of women, who although hidden from view, were nevertheless present and active from the very beginning of Sufism. From Fatima of Nishapur who taught the Sufi master Dhu'l-Nun to look beyond gender in matters pertaining to God and the Truth, to Fatima Khezruya who was known for the practice of *futuwwat,* to Bibi Sayyar who talked about God's oppression with candor and humor, to Sayena who embodied confidence and intelligence in her encounters with

Sufi masters of her time, to many contemporary Sufi women like Parvaneh who challenged the male dominance of Sufi community by advocating for women and children, and Mehri the poet who sought to be near her master and benefit from Sufi companionship in spite of sex segregation, women have made their imprint in Sufi communities and Sufi culture.

Finally, throughout this dissertation it seems that I have constructed the relationship between feminism and Sufism as a one-way relationship where I employ feminism to reconsider Sufism. However, for me and a few others who believe in bringing spiritual contemplative practices and feminism together, feminism as a justice/equality project can only come to fruition through love and compassion, and the kind of transformations it advocates must happen concurrently in the inner/individual and outer/social realms. The feminism informed by Sufism is a significant spiritual tool not only for self-knowledge and self-discovery, but also for activism through love.

Ultimately however, the practice of Sufism is not an intellectual endeavor, but a spiritual experience that defies the logical, temporal order of this universe. What I have put down in this dissertation therefore only points to the outer experience and not the inner one. Although it has its own value, it can never define Sufism as a practice.

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