From the online library at www.worldwisdom.com

"WALKING UPON THE PATH OF GOD LIKE MEN"?
Women and the Feminine in the Islamic Mystical Tradition

Maria Massi Dakake

In recent years, numerous books have been published that attempt to correct the decidedly negative Orientalist view of the role of women in Islamic society. These works have made a point of stressing the essential spiritual equality and dignity that Islam gives to women, as well as the special importance many Islamic women had in the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the early establishment of the Islamic community. More specifically, within the last decade a number of works have been published which reveal the exceptionally strong presence of the feminine element in one of the most important aspects of Islamic civilization—the Islamic mystical tradition, or Sufism. In 1992, Sachiko Murata published *The Tao of Islam*, a masterful and thoroughly unique work which brought to light the feminine elements present in the Islamic mystical tradition (particularly in the works of Ibn ʿArabī) and analyzed them with reference to the mystical symbolism of the Taoist tradition. More recently, the renowned scholar of Islam, Annemarie Schimmel, published a small volume dealing with several aspects of women in Islamic tradition, which contains a considerable amount of material related to Sufism (*My Soul Is Woman*). Perhaps the most significant contribution to the study of this issue was Rkia Cornell's discovery of a manuscript containing the Sufi biographer, as-Sulamī's section on female Sufi devotees—previously considered to have been lost. She published an edited version and translation of the text in 1999 as *Early Sufi Women*. The present article, which attempts an analysis of the role of the feminine in the Sufi tradition, is deeply indebted to their scholarship.

There are two aspects to the presence of the feminine in the Sufi tradition that will be addressed in the present work. First, there is

the metaphysical aspect—that is, the role that the feminine principle plays in symbolic and mystical interpretations of the nature of God and the world. The second aspect of the role of the feminine in the Sufi tradition has to do with the historical role that female practitioners of the mystical path have played in the development and history of Sufism. While allowed only limited participation in most other public activities, many women found the Sufi path to be a realm in which their participation and even original contributions were eventually validated, if not always immediately accepted.

These two aspects—the metaphysical and the practical—tend to be mentioned together in many cursory treatments of the subject of women and Sufism, as if they were part and parcel of the same basic phenomenon—namely a female presence of some sort in the Islamic mystical tradition. But I would like to make the point that these two things do not necessarily go hand in hand—that is, a more feminine, mystical view of God does not always entail an active role for human females in the worldly institution of a mystical tradition. What I want to do in this article, then, is first to distinguish these two aspects from one another, and secondly to show the relationship between the two as expressed in the particular formulations of Sufi truths attributed to women.

Metaphysical Symbolism of the Feminine

In Sufi symbolism, and indeed in Islam itself, man (and here I mean human beings in general) is surrounded by the feminine in his own existence. It is through the Divine *raḥma*, "Mercy, Compassion," that the world is made manifest—through the "breath of the Compassionate" (*nafas ar-Raḥmān*) all things come into being—and God's Mercy is said to "encompass all things." The word for mercy, *raḥma*, is grammatically feminine, and is etymologically related to the word *raḥam*, meaning "womb." God's Compassion and Mercy can thus be said to encompass and nurture everything in existence, just as the womb initially encompasses, nourishes, and protects every human being. Thus the mercy of existence itself is symbolized as a kind of "Divine womb" which embraces and sustains all being. While the experience of "being in the womb" is common to all humanity—male and female alike—the "womb" itself is, of course, a specifically femi-

nine concept. Man's relation to the Divine perceived in this way is the relationship of the child to the mother, and so it is a relationship universally understood among human beings—male and female—while it is also one in which the Divine is considered from the feminine aspect of maternity.

If men, like all created beings, are surrounded by the feminine element of Divine Mercy, they are also from another perspective situated between two poles of femininity. For all men potentially, and for the Sufi mystic in particular, life is a constant struggle to overcome, conquer, and detach oneself from the *nafs*, that is, the "ego" or "soul" or "passionate self," on the one hand, and on the other, to draw ever nearer to the Divine, striving ultimately for knowledge of, or union with, the Divine Essence or *Dhāt*. Both the *nafs*, which man must dominate and subdue on the path to spiritual realization, and the Divine Essence, or *Dhāt*, to which man must strive to move ever closer, are grammatically feminine in the Arabic language and are designated by the feminine pronoun. The feminine aspect of these two "poles" of man's spiritual journey has been the source of richly symbolic mystical interpretation and poetic imagery.

The Sufi conquering his *nafs* (specifically here the *nafs al-ammārah bi'l-su'*, or the "soul that commands to evil") is often portrayed as man dominating and subjugating the "feminine" within himself, usually understood to mean his spiritual weakness, or his weakness for women and attachments in this world (and the world, in this negative sense, is referred to in Arabic as *dunyā*, also grammatically feminine). For a proper marital life, in traditional Islamic terms, the husband must rule over his wife ("Men are in charge of women") and the woman must submit to her husband's rational demands. When the roles are reversed, according to traditional interpretations, chaos ensues. Similarly, the Sufis made it clear that a proper spiritual life requires that the spirit or intellect (*'aql* or *rūḥ*—grammatically masculine terms) rule over the passions of the *nafs* or soul. Thus considered from this perspective, the feminine represents that which is deficient in man—his weakness and his desire for the world—with the world itself being symbolized as a feminine temptress.

At the same time, the hidden and eternally unmanifest Essence of God, the God Beyond-Being, the *Dhāt*, is also symbolically femi-

nine. If the *nafs* may kindle man's baser desires, the *Dhāt*, or Essence, standing at the opposite end of the Sufi's mystical path, is on the contrary the source of his greatest and most ennobling desire. In the first relationship, the Sufi strives to dominate the *nafs;* while in his relationship with the Divine Essence, the Sufi must inculcate and then surrender himself to the desire for the Essence, and allow himself to be attracted by Its hidden beauties. That is, he must allow the Essence to dominate his every earthly desire and he must actively seek to be an increasingly perfect and worthy suitor for Its sublime beauty. The *nafs* attracts men to the world with a false and fleeting, if manifest, beauty; while the *Dhāt* attracts with Its perfect, eternal, and infinitely unmanifest beauty. If the *nafs*, like a prostitute, is bold and quick to reveal the ugliness that lies below her gilded surface, the *Dhāt* is silent and still, like a chaste woman, only revealing a glimpse of Its beauty to those who are patient and worthy. If the *nafs* hides its ugliness behind the veil of deceit, the *Dhāt* preserves its sacredness behind an existential veil.

The symbolism of the veil, in this regard then, is also crucial. Veiling is a potent symbol in Islamic culture. While both men and women are supposed to dress modestly and cover their private parts (*ʿawra*, lit., shame), the veil is particularly associated with women, who traditionally covered even their faces—that is, their very identities. Insofar as the veil is associated with women or the feminine, it also has a dual nature, for one veils both that which is shameful and that which is sublime—that which is too vile to show to strangers and that which is too beautiful to expose to them. The Divine Essence in Islamic mysticism is always portrayed as a veiled reality, chastely refusing to reveal "Her" beauty except in fleeting glimpses, and then only to the truly deserving. The *nafs*, on the other hand, veils itself only for deceit, and in fact, is often portrayed as the veil itself. It is man's passions and attachments to the world—or the world itself—which is the veil that covers the eyes of the intellect and prevents it from seeing Ultimate Truth. It may even be said that the veil covering the Essence in reality does not cover the Essence, but rather covers the eyes that strive to see It.

Given that both the passionate soul and the Divine Essence are connected with the feminine, human women could serve as symbols

of both that which is lowest in man and that which is most sublime in God. In one passage from that most famous of all Sufi poets, Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī, we read:

> Know that your ego is indeed a woman—it is worse than a woman, for the woman is a part of evil, your ego the whole.[1]

Elsewhere:

> Woman is she whose way and goal are color and scent: She is the reality of the ego that commands to evil embodied in the physical constitution of humankind.[2]

But Rūmī also alludes to woman as a means of contemplating the Divine when he tells us that in the "coquetry and subtle movements" of women, man may recognize "God's theophany behind a gossamer veil."[3] He also tells us that the Prophet once said that women "totally dominate men of intellect" and only "ignorant men dominate women, for they are shackled by the ferocity of animals. They have no kindness, gentleness, or love, since animality dominates their nature. . . . She (meaning woman) is the radiance of God, she is not your beloved. She is the Creator—you could say that she is not created."[4] Thus from Rūmī's perspective, woman could symbolize, on one level, the more negative qualities of humankind, and on another level she could be seen as the "radiance of God," even as the "Creator"—perhaps alluding to the creative nature of the Divine *raḥma*.

The polarity between the two "feminines" is also manifest in other, related symbolic interpretations. For example, Ibn ʿArabī gives a mystical commentary on the Quranic verse: "We have created thee from a single soul, and from it We have created its mate."[5] Ibn ʿArabī

[1] William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983), p. 165.

[2] Ibid., p. 165.

[3] Ibid., p. 287.

[4] Ibid., p. 169.

[5] Quran, 4:1.

tells us that the meaning of this verse is that man stands between the perfect, "single soul" (grammatically feminine) from which he was created, and the woman, his mate, created from himself.[6] (Ibn ʿArabī reads this verse as alluding to the idea that Eve was created from Adam, an idea that is not found explicitly in the Quran, but which is found in Islamic *ḥadīth* and commentary on the Quran). Ibn ʿArabī also gives a long exposition on the famous Prophetic *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet said that three things had been made lovable to him—women, perfume, and prayer. Both the word "women" and the word "prayer" are grammatically feminine with the intermediate perfume being grammatically masculine, and so again we have the symbolic masculine situated between the two symbolic feminines of women and prayer. He explains why in this *ḥadīth* the Prophet begins with woman and ends with ritual prayer:

> The reason for this is that woman is a part of the man in the root of the manifestation of her entity. A human being's knowledge of his soul is prior to the knowledge of his Lord, since his knowledge of his Lord is the result of his knowledge of his soul. That is why the Prophet said: "He who knows his soul, knows his Lord."[7]

In this particular exposition, woman is again connected with the idea of the soul—but far from being the veil that veils the face of God, the soul is here the primary means of knowing God. Indeed, for Ibn ʿArabī, woman is the created being who offers the most perfect vehicle for the contemplation of the Divine—since man, in considering his physical power over woman, realizes the power of the Divine over all men; and in realizing her attracting power over him, he realizes the saving power of attraction in the Divine Itself.[8] It should also be noted that for Ibn ʿArabī, perhaps more so than for any other major Sufi thinker, women figure positively and prominently in both

[6] Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 197.

[7] Ibid., p. 189.

[8] Ibid., p. 192.

his metaphysical expositions and his practical spiritual life—having himself been profoundly influenced by his female Sufi masters and companions, and having initiated a number of female disciples.[9]

One could go on and on, finding numerous ways and instances in which the idea of the dual nature of the feminine and of the *nafs-Dhāt* polarity is poetically and metaphorically expressed throughout Sufi writings. I have only had time to give a few examples of these ideas in Sufi literature, but they should suffice to make clear the powerful symbolism of the feminine in Sufi thought.

Woman as Symbol, Woman as *Sālik*

The symbolism of the feminine polarity I have just described in Islamic mysticism derives its power, in no small part, from the presumption that it is a man, a masculine being, who is torn between these two poles, seeking always to journey from one to the other. Man's authority over woman in traditional Islamic society serves as a symbol for the domination of the masculine intellect over the female passions; while his desire for woman on a physical and emotional level serves as a symbol of his yearning for his spiritual Beloved. But the question arises, what does this symbolism mean for a female mystic, for the female *sālik* or "traveler" journeying from her own soul to her Divine Beloved? How can she relate to this symbolism and what can it possibly mean for her?

A simple resolution of this issue might be to reverse the symbolic structure and say that if for man, his authority over the feminine symbolizes his dominance over his ego, then for a woman, her obedience to the masculine symbolizes or becomes a reflection of her ego's obedience to the intellect or the spirit. Logically, of course, this makes sense, but the power and dynamism of the original symbol does not carry into its adaptation. In this reversal of the symbolism, the female mystic is identified more directly with the ego, and only indirectly with the intellect that actively seeks to subdue the ego and attach itself to the Divine. Thus the idea of the *sālik*, as the middle element of intellect between two feminine polarities, actively moving

[9] See, e.g., Annemarie Schimmel, *My Soul Is Woman* (New York: Continuum, 1999), pp. 45-46.

between the two, is compromised. One female mystic, Umm Talq, gave her own "masculine" interpretation of the passionate soul or ego, saying that "the lower soul is a king (*mālik*) if you indulge it, but a slave (*mamlūk*) if you torment it."[10] This succeeds on one level, but does not convey the powerful male-female polarity of the original symbolism.

Another answer, and one that would solve, in a sense, the above problem, is the widely expressed Sufi idea that "every woman is a man on the path." That is, every woman actively journeying on the path is necessarily "a man" in a symbolic—perhaps even an existential—sense, since she is "active" (as opposed to passive) in her journeying, and insofar as journeying requires the intellect as its guiding force, every woman actively journeying on the mystical path is identified directly with the masculine element of the "intellect" or "spirit," having subdued her ego to a sufficient extent. Farīd ad-Dīn ʿAṭṭār notes in his biographical treatment of the famous female Sufi, Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya, "When a woman becomes a man in the path of God, she is a man and one cannot any more call her a woman."[11] Rūmī poetically expresses a similar idea:

> An effeminate man is not suited to fight against the ego; incense and musk are not suited for the back parts of a donkey.
> Since women never go out to fight the holy war, how should they engage in the Greater Holy War? Except rarely, when a Rustam is hidden within a woman's body, as in the case of Mary.
> In the same way, women are hidden in the bodies of those men who are feminine from faintness of heart.[12]

The clear problem with this solution—that every woman on the path is, so to speak, inwardly a man—is that it denies any natural or normative understanding of the mystical path for women. Only

[10] Rkia Cornell, *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr an-Niswa al-Mutaʿabbidat as-Sufiyyat* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), p. 118 (Cornell's translation).

[11] A.J. Arberry (trans.), *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Auliyaʾ (Memorial of the Saints) by Farid ad-Din Attar*, p. 40.

[12] Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, pp. 165-166.

women who are highly exceptional, who are in some sense "not really women" can have the vocation to "walk upon the path." Frithjof Schuon notes that to conceive of a saintly woman as somehow a man is "absurd in itself, but defensible"[13] from a certain perspective; however, he further states that "to allege that the woman who is holy has become a man by the fact of her sanctity, amounts to presenting her as a denatured being: in reality, a holy woman can only be such on the basis of her perfect femininity. . . ."[14]

The identification of spiritual realization with masculinity is furthered by the use among certain mystical writers, including Ibn ʿArabī, of the term *rajuliyya* or "manliness," to refer to those who have reached the highest spiritual station, the state of the "Perfect Man" or the *insān al-kāmil*.[15] While Ibn ʿArabī notes that he is not using the term in a gender specific sense, and that women as well as men might reach this state of spiritual "manliness," it is significant that the term itself employs the gender specific Arabic word for "man." Such usage would seem, in effect, to be a contradiction in terms. For the term *rajul*, meaning man in a purely masculine sense, is not the same as the term *insān* used in the phrase "perfect man." *Insān* is precisely not gender specific. It refers to man in the universal sense; thus every human being—male or female—by virtue of being human, has the potential to reach the state of the "perfect man." If the hierarchical relationship between intellect and the passionate soul are reflected in the physical and social hierarchy of men and women in the traditional Islamic view, then the gender neutrality of the *insān al-kāmil*, or the "perfect man" that all true seekers strive to become is an affirmation of the profound spiritual equality between men and women that is clearly indicated in the Quran. The prototype of the *insān al-kāmil*, or "perfect man," is not the masculine Adam as opposed to the feminine Eve, but the as-yet-undifferentiated Adam, the "single soul" from which both men and women were created. This

[13] Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (Bedfont: Perennial Books, 1981), p. 142.

[14] Ibid., p. 143.

[15] Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, p. 268.

primordial Adam, this undifferentiated human soul, was made "in the image of God" and so reflected on a human plane the perfection of the Divine. As God contains both masculine and feminine qualities in Islam—possessing both names of "majesty," such as Judge, King, Lord, the Transcendent, the Strong, and names of "beauty," such as Merciful, Compassionate, Intimate Friend, the Gentle, the One Who Loves—so too did this primordial Adam contain both masculine and feminine qualities and virtues. Thus it stands to reason that in order to reach this state of original Adamic purity, man must attain all of the virtues, masculine and feminine alike. It is not enough that a man be brave, strong, chivalrous, and detached, but he must also be, at least inwardly, gentle, nurturing, merciful, and devoted.

To the extent that these virtues obtained more or less naturally in their respective gender affinities among human beings—and experience tells us that this is not always the case—then a man's spiritual struggle would be to perfect his masculine virtues outwardly, while acquiring the feminine virtues inwardly. Likewise, a woman may have to acquire certain masculine virtues not inherent to her nature—such as detachment and bravery. Viewed from this perspective, if "every woman on the path is a man," then every man on the path must also be, at least from one perspective, "a woman"—in the sense that he must acquire the positive feminine elements of his original self, lost in the initial separation of male and female "from a single soul." Perhaps it is for this reason that Rūmī, in the passage I just quoted, spoke about the virtues of "kindness and gentleness"—stereotypically feminine virtues—as "human attributes," while excessive "domination" and "ferocity"—particularly male vices—are described as signs of "animality." In other words, the human *sālikūn*, or mystical seekers, of whatever gender they may be, and regardless of their natural or inherent inclinations, must reintegrate in themselves all the positive human virtues—masculine and feminine.

Women Sufis—"Walking upon the Path of God like Men"?

Turning from the theoretical or symbolic level, I want to address in the remainder of my article some of the particular qualities of the Sufi life as practiced by historical Sufi women and the degree to which they reflect the theoretical or metaphysical issues regarding the mas-

culine-feminine symbolism I have raised. The questions I will seek to answer here are: Can we identify a particularly feminine strain of Islamic mysticism? Are the struggles and the victories along the path to spiritual realization different for a female *sālik* than they are for their male counterparts? And do female Sufis express the sublime spiritual experiences of the Divine Beloved in ways that differ from men, reflecting a different understanding of the relationship between the lover and the Beloved when the lover is a woman?

If every woman on the path is striving toward becoming *al-insān al-kāmil*, then she must struggle to embody traditionally masculine virtues, on the one hand, and avoid certain exaggerations of her feminine nature which might be spiritually limiting. When we examine the words and actions of Sufi women as recorded in Sufi biographical dictionaries, we see that these women indeed seem to have attained to a certain level of "masculine" virtue. In the first place, following the Sufi path—if ultimately a private undertaking—was at least at some stages, a public one. Especially as Sufism developed, the attachment of the Sufi initiate to a recognized Sufi *shaykh* came to be seen as a necessity for journeying upon the path, and a Sufi's social connection with his fellow mystics in the Sufi brotherhood became increasingly customary. Women, it seems, were not altogether infrequently accepted as the initiates of male Sufi *shaykhs* and in some cases, also became attached in one way or another to the order.[16] While the public sphere was not one generally considered appropriate for women in the classical Islamic period, nonetheless, the many women whose lives and words are recorded in the Sufi biographical works were necessarily public figures, otherwise they would never have come to the attention of their male biographers. The insistence of at least one of these biographers, Farīd ad-Dīn ʿAṭṭār, that a woman who journeys like a man on the spiritual path cannot be called a woman was, of course, one way in which the presence of these women in the public sphere—their attachment to male Sufi *shaykhs* and their social inter-

[16] Note that Murata mentions in her book that Ibn ʿArabī dealt with the question of Platonic male-female interaction in the context of the Sufi life, indicating that the presence of women among these orders was an issue for discussion (cf. *The Tao of Islam*, p. 266).

action with their male counterparts—could be legitimized in the face of strict Islamic insistence upon the necessary separation of unrelated men and women.

In addition to their role as "public figures"—already a decidedly masculine position—Sufi women are also frequently portrayed as possessing the masculine virtues of detachment, fortitude, and a lack of crippling sentimentality—sometimes to a dazzling extent. There is a story of the famous Basran Sufi, Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya, for example, in which she is said to have looked upon an executed man hanging on the gibbet. With cold objectivity, Rābiʿa addressed the dead man, saying: "With that tongue, you used to say 'There is no god but God'!"[17] A similar story is told regarding the Andalusian Sufi, Nūna Fāṭima bint al-Muthannā, who was one of the female masters of Ibn ʿArabī. In this case, Nūna Fāṭima, already an elderly woman, was visiting a mosque and was struck with a whip by the *muʾadhdhin* of the mosque (perhaps for excessive devotions). She was immediately angered by this, scowled at the *muʾadhdhin* and left. Later, when she heard the *muʾadhdhin*'s call to prayer, she regretted her ill-will toward him, and asked forgiveness for harboring negative feelings toward one who chanted the name of God so beautifully. Rābiʿa, looking at the dead man, feels no human or sentimental sympathy for him, but only regret at the loss of a tongue that once proclaimed the oneness of God. And Nūna Fāṭima relented toward the *muʾadhdhin*, not because of a kind of sympathetic forgiveness for his human failing, but only because of the service he rendered to God and those who worship Him. In other words, their attachment to creatures was strictly on account of the divine elements manifest in them, rather than a matter of human sentimentality.

If the feminine virtues of devotion, mercy, compassion, and nurturing were positive in themselves but negative in their tendency to attach one to worldly things (hence the female Sufi desire to purify these qualities and direct them inwardly and counter them with a healthy detachment), masculine virtues like strength and bravery—noble in themselves—could become corrupted and the source of spiritual ailment. In particular, masculine dominance, when not

[17] Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, p. 80 (Cornell's translation).

set within proper limits, had the possibility of leading to particular masculine vices of pride and a hunger for domination and conquest. Murata defines this as "negative masculinity," and even associates it directly with the evil argument with which Satan is said to have opposed God's command that he prostrate himself before Adam.[18] Satan's moral error is the prototype of a particularly masculine vice, for it involves a perverted use of reason or intellect in the service of self-pride and a reluctance to submit to another. Thus men, perhaps more so than women, were prone to falling into the vices of pride and love of dominance. And women Sufis, according to the biographical and historical accounts of their lives, not only exhibited positive "masculine" virtues in their own persons, but also frequently took the liberty of publicly and privately rebuking the men around them when they displayed particularly masculine faults. In fact, some of the most prominent male spiritual authorities in Islamic history are recorded as being corrected by their female Sufi counterparts. In this literature, their correction takes two main forms: criticism of male sexuality or desire for marriage and criticism of public claims of spiritual authority.

Sexual Asceticism

One of the characteristics of some early female saints and pietists in Islam was a state of celibacy and the avoidance of sexuality, even in its licit forms. While this is something immediately noticed by Western scholars more familiar with the Christian spiritual tradition, this kind of celibacy or asceticism is not true of all or perhaps even most female Islamic mystics. Many, for example, chose to marry for spiritual reasons, often marrying male mystics who could serve as their spiritual guides. However, the rejection of offers of marriage and male sexual attention—particularly from prominent male spiritual authorities—is a significant theme in the Sufi literature pertaining to women. For example, there is the case of the Meccan devotee, Malīka bint al-Munkadir. On one particular occasion, two of her most important male spiritual contemporaries, Mālik ibn Dīnār and Ayūb as-Sakhtiyānī, encountered her on the pilgrimage to Mecca. Noticing

[18] Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, pp. 269-270.

her piety and devotion, they approached her to tell her that she could improve her [spiritual] state by marrying.[19] Malīka was not convinced, and responded by saying, "Even if Mālik ibn Dīnār himself were to ask me, I would not be interested!" Mālik, perhaps pleased by her backhanded compliment to his spiritual reputation and sure she was exaggerating, responded triumphantly: "I am Mālik! And this is Ayūb as-Sakhtiyānī!" Malīka, however, was unimpressed. She responded disdainfully: "I would have thought that the two of you [given your reputations] would have been too preoccupied with the invocation of God to concern yourself with women!"[20]

An interesting example of apparent female Sufi criticism of male sexuality is to be found in an encounter between Fāṭima of Nishapur and Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī. This apparently outspoken Sufi woman had been conversing with the famous tenth century Sufi, Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī in an intimate way, with her face veil removed, when he suddenly happened to notice that her hands had been ornamented with henna, presumably from her recently concluded wedding celebration. Abū Yazīd commented on her henna-adorned hands with surprise and perhaps some disdain for the feminine desire for worldly luxury that it seemed to indicate. Yet she immediately reversed the situation by criticizing the attention he paid to this aspect of her feminine nature. She immediately put her face veil back on and declared that so long as Abū Yazīd had been speaking to her without taking notice of her hands, their intimate conversation was lawful and appropriate and she did not feel the slightest bit of unease; but as soon as he noticed her hands, their intimacy had become *ḥarām*.[21]

[19] Marriage in Islam, unlike in Christianity, was seen as an important part of one's religious life. A famous *ḥadīth* of the Prophet declared that "marriage is half of your religion." For this reason, monasticism and celibacy are not generally celebrated virtues in the Islamic view, and might even be considered blameworthy, especially for a woman.

[20] Ibn al-Jawzī, *Sifat as-Safwā*, vol. 2, p. 135.

[21] Arberry, *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, p. 174.

Spiritual Pride and the Virtue of Silence

As already made abundantly clear, the goal of the Sufi path is the suppression of the ego. The ego, however, is a clever thing, which having been defeated on one front, stealthily moves to another. Thus the Sufi is told to always be on guard against the clever maneuvers of the ego to subvert his spiritual progress. One of the more subtle forms of egoism, and one which reportedly plagued even the greatest of Sufi masters, was the mistaken or arrogant belief that one had reached a high spiritual station—a kind of spiritual pride (again, not unlike that attributed to Satan in his refusal to prostrate himself before Adam). In Sufi biographical works, one Sufi after another falls victim to this moral failure. And in many cases, it is a woman who is given the task of pointing it out. While there are many such instances in the hagiographical literature, I will here mention only a few of the most revealing episodes.

Some of the most interesting such encounters take place between Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya and the early, prominent pietist, Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. Historically speaking, Rābiʿa was only a rough contemporary of Ḥasan, and it is highly unlikely that the two ever met; yet she constantly served as a foil for Ḥasan in the hagiographical literature. In one particular instance, Ḥasan apparently challenged Rābiʿa to a battle of spiritual power or will, *himmah*. Ḥasan reportedly threw his prayer carpet on the river, where it remained afloat, and invited Rābiʿa to do the same and join him in prayer. Rābiʿa, seeming rather annoyed by his petty challenge, threw her own prayer carpet into the air, where it remained suspended. In the battle of spiritual *himmah*, Rābiʿa won because, as the narrator tells us, Ḥasan had not yet achieved the spiritual station that would allow him to perform such a feat. But this is not the primary point of the story. Rather, Rābiʿa demonstrated not only her superior spiritual *himmah*, but also her superior level of mystical understanding when she told Ḥasan that such feats, whether on water or air matter little. "That which you did," she noted, "a fish can do just the same, and that which I did, a fly can do. The real [spiritual] work . . . lies beyond both of these and it is necessary to occupy ourselves with real work."[22]

[22] Margaret Smith, *Rābiʿa: The Life and Work of Rābiʿa and Other Women Mystics in Islam*, pp. 56-57.

Besides the legendary encounters frequently related between Rābiʿa and Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, there are also many other similar instances in which male spiritual pride is cut down to size by female critics. For example, Sulamī's recently edited biographical compilation on early female devotees mentions a certain Fāṭima bint Aḥmad who came upon the spiritual teacher, Abu'l-ʿAbbās ad-Dīnāwārī lecturing on the nature of *uns*, or intimacy with God. She raised her voice to silence his own, saying: "How excellent is your description of that which you lack! Had you tasted anything of what you describe or witnessed anything about which you speak, you would remain silent!"[23] In another example, Fāṭima ad-Dimashqiyya is said to have silenced a religious scholar lecturing in the main mosque of Damascus saying to him: "You spoke very well, and you have perfected the art of rhetoric, have you perfected the art of silence?"[24] The report concludes by saying that this scholar never spoke again. As-Sulamī even reports an incident in which one of his own spiritual masters, Abu'l-Qāsim an-Naṣrābādhī, was heckled continuously by a woman named Qurashiyya an-Nasawiyya. As-Sulamī's short biographical entry on Qurashiyya informs us that she considered silence to be an important and useful spiritual virtue. This was the immediate backdrop for her criticisms of an-Naṣrābādhī's public teaching sessions. She contrasted his fine words with what she describes as his "ugly morals." When he tried to silence her, she responded: "I will be quiet when you are quiet!"[25] It should be noted, however, that while Naṣrābādhī responded with irritation to his female critic, most of the Sufi men reportedly chastised by women in similar instances, responded with humility and an honorable acceptance and validation of the criticism—if only through their lack of protest. Thus, in many cases, such incidents may have been recorded primarily for the purpose of demonstrating the virtues of humility and self-objectivity that characterized these male Sufi masters, who were able to accept valid criticism of their behavior without regard for the nature of its source.

[23] Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 180-181. My translation is based on Cornell's own translation with minor modification.

[24] Ibid., p. 204 (Cornell's translation).

[25] See ibid., p. 224, n. 182.

In any case, all three of these examples portray women as using quick wit and sharp words to silence male spiritual authorities. These women enter the public realm to confront the spiritual shortcomings of some of the spiritual authorities they see around them. But in the expressed views of these women, the flaws of these men (almost all recognized spiritual authorities) would seem to stem from the desire for public recognition. If it was a keen feminine insight that allowed these women to discern the flaws to which men were particularly susceptible, the manner in which these women pointed out those flaws was hardly stereotypically feminine. The moral voice they exhibit in these sources is not a voice that is soft or gentle. Their words are pithy and pointed, witty and authoritative. Their method is direct and public confrontation, not subtle insinuation. They are opposing their own positive "masculinity" acquired on the path, to the vices of negative masculinity that they perceive in some of their male Sufi contemporaries.

In fact, these women's attainment to the masculine virtue of worldly detachment is often portrayed as being so complete as to blind to them all that was not God. Rābiʿa, for example, is recorded to have insisted that her love for God was so all-encompassing that it left no room for the love of His creatures or created things. On one occasion, Rābiʿa is said to have encountered a fellow mystic, Rabāḥ al-Qaysī, lovingly embracing a child. Rābiʿa chastised him for this, expressing amazement that a person of his spiritual station could have such love for a created being. Rabāḥ objected—and perhaps quite rightly so—that such love is a mercy from the Divine, implying that to ignore it would be ungrateful.[26] The text does not record Rābiʿa's response to his argument, but it is clear that it is a perspective to which she cannot relate. Not only did Rābiʿa insist that God alone is deserving of her love, she insisted that this love be a purely disinterested and selfless love. Hence the famous story of Rābiʿa running through the streets of Basra with a bucket of water in one hand and a flaming torch in the other, saying that she wanted to put out the fires of hell and burn up the Garden of Paradise so that God would be loved for nothing other

[26] Ibid., p. 78.

than Himself alone.[27] Ibn ʿArabī criticized Rābiʿa for this perspective, saying that to deny the virtues of the pleasures of Paradise was to be ungrateful for God's gifts. But again, for Rābiʿa, God's earthly gifts were nothing compared to the gift of His Presence. While for Rabāḥ al-Qaysi and Ibn ʿArabī, their love of God seemed to lead them to a new appreciation of His manifestation in earthly creatures, for Rābiʿa, her love of Him made her insensitive to all created reality.

Indeed one of the qualities attributed emphatically to nearly all female Sufis in the biographical tradition is an extreme asceticism—again, an asceticism for which they are often portrayed as having more fortitude than their male contemporaries, who express surprise at the ascetic abilities of their female counterparts and often suggest a merciful softening of their mortifications of the flesh. Many women on the Sufi path, as mentioned above, remained celibate and unmarried. Rābiʿa, for example, is said to have refused numerous offers of marriage, and others were said to have put limits on their marriages, refusing to let them interfere with their spiritual life. Rābiʿa's older namesake, Rābiʿa bint Ismāʿīl of Syria, for example, married a younger man who was a promising Sufi, so that she could render service to God by supporting his spiritual pursuits with her inherited financial wealth. After they were married, she told him that he was like a brother to her, and they remained married in a purely platonic manner, with Rābiʿa supporting her husband and his other wives, without desire for her own earthly marital fulfillment.[28] Fāṭima of Nishapur, mentioned above in her encounter with Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī, is said to have proposed—indeed insisted upon—marriage to one of the great Sufi men of her age. But she married him primarily to support her own spiritual pursuits. When her future husband, Aḥmad, first refused her marital proposal, she chastised him for not being chivalrous enough to take on the responsibility of taking care of her materially and spiritually, and she eventually shamed him into marrying her. But she was determined that her new husband should be an aid and not a hindrance to her following the mystical path. Soon after their marriage

[27] Schimmel, *My Soul Is Woman*, p. 35. See also Arberry, *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, p. 51.

[28] Schimmel, *My Soul Is Woman*, p. 40; Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, p. 138.

she journeyed with her husband to her above-mentioned encounter with Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī, who both husband and wife recognized as their Sufi master. When she initially removed her face veil in Abū Yazīd's presence, her husband objected to her boldness toward the Sufi master. But she responded by telling him that while he, Aḥmad, is her worldly husband, and so fulfills her physical desires, Abū Yazīd is her spiritual master, and thus fulfills her spiritual needs, and that physical attraction does not enter into their relationship.[29]

However, it should be noted that while these women sometimes seem impervious to the sentiment of love in relation to earthly creatures, they are hardly so cold and restrained in their expressions of love for the Divine. In fact, the harshness with which they sometimes approach men contrasts sharply with the tenderness and longing found in their words addressed to God. For Rābiʿa, in particular, numerous loving addresses to God are recorded, and she is said to have considered these kinds of intimate conversations with her Beloved to be more valuable than canonical prayer for bringing one close to God. In beautiful verses attributed to both Ḥabība al-ʿAdawiyya and Fāṭima bint Muḥammad, we read:

> O my Lord, the stars are shining and the eyes of men are closed and kings have shut their doors and every lover is alone with his beloved; and here I am alone with Thee.[30]

Rābiʿa bint Ismāʿīl, married platonically to her Sufi husband, and devoted inwardly only to God, says:

> I have made Thee the Intimate of my inmost heart, but my body is made permissible for those who desire to sit with me;
> And my body is friendly toward guests; but the Beloved of my heart is the guest of my inmost self (*fuʾād*).[31]

[29] Arberry, *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, pp. 173-174.

[30] For its attribution to Ḥabība al-ʿAdawiyya, see Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, p. 202; for the attribution to Fāṭima bint Muḥammad al-Munkadir, see Ibn al-Jawzī, *Sifat as-Safwā*, vol. 2, p. 137.

[31] Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, p. 317 (my translation).

Elsewhere, Rābiʿa is quoted as saying of God:

> A beloved no other beloved can rival
> No one but He has a share of my heart
> A Beloved who, though absent from my sight and my person
> Is never absent from my inmost self.[32]

The asceticism of these women, so extreme outwardly, gave way to a flood of loving tenderness directed toward the true aim of their affections. If only a single spouse was decreed for women in Islam, while polygamy was permitted for men, these women perhaps felt the importance of not compromising their devotion to God with devotion to any other thing. Thus the Jerusalemite devotee, Lubāba, declares that she is ashamed for God to see her preoccupied with anything other than Him.[33] And Rayḥāna of Basra says to God: "Thou art my Intimate Companion, my Hope and my Joy; and my heart refuses to love anything but Thee."[34] Indeed, there is a case where a Sufi woman lamented the fact that her friend's husband had decided to take a second wife, not for her friend's loss, but because the husband would then be distracted by two wives from his spiritual devotion to God.[35] The asceticism of these Sufi women, then, was not an asceticism of fear, as was the case, for example, with Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, who was always weeping and denying himself out of a deep-seated dread of hell-fire. Rābiʿa rarely complained of a fear of hell, and when she once had a passing doubt about being put in hell, a divine inspiration reassured her that God would never do something so cruel to her. Rather, female Sufi asceticism is more often than not an asceticism of love. For these Sufi women, it was not a question of denying themselves certain worldly pleasures, but of their complete disinterest in any pleasure other than Him. The Damascene mystic Muʾmina declares: "O most Beloved. This world and the next are not pleasurable except

[32] Ibid., p. 316 (Cornell's translation with slight modification).

[33] Ibid., p. 82.

[34] Ibid., p. 95 (my translation).

[35] Ibid., p. 126.

through Thee. So do not overwhelm me with the loss of Thee and the punishment that results from it!"[36] The punishment is not hell, only separation from their true "spouse."

Thus far from making these Sufi women hardened and embittered, their asceticism and detachment from worldly love allowed them to direct all their feminine qualities of devotion and tenderness inwardly, toward the Divine Essence. In other words, their harshness and detachment toward earthly creatures and human men was not necessarily a denial or rejection of their feminine virtue or even of the important Islamic institution of marriage (as much as it may have seemed so on the outside), but rather a determination to direct all of their feminine devotion and love toward the only "Spouse" worthy of it—the Divine, Himself.

"Walking Upon The Path Of God Like Men"?
Women and the Feminine in the Islamic Mystical Tradition
by Maria Massi Dakake

Features in

Sufism: Love and Wisdom
© 2006 World Wisdom, Inc.
Edited by Jean-Louis Michon and Roger Gaetani
All Rights Reserved. For Personal Usage Only
www.worldwisdom.com

[36] Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, p. 86 (Cornell's translation with slight modification).