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## NARRATIVIZING EARLY MYSTIC AND SUFI WOMEN\*

### Mechanisms of gendering in Sufi hagiographies

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#### **Introduction**

Both scholars and practitioners of Sufism have attributed gender egalitarian impulses to the Sufi tradition.<sup>1</sup> They point to Sufism as an early proponent of women's access to knowledge and authority, contrasting it with other streams of Islamic thought and practice that have historically resisted female leadership. However, a closer reading of early Sufi writings reveals male authors held conflicting and often highly anti-egalitarian stances regarding the place of their female contemporaries in the social hierarchy, even while some portray women favorably in their work. In fact, male authors gendered their writings such that womanhood/effeminacy was equated with inferiority. Here, I offer a literary analysis of male-authored depictions of early mystic and Sufi women, male youths, slaves and black individuals to further understandings of gendered dynamics in Sufi thought.<sup>2</sup> I investigate specifically how 'Abd al-Karīm b. Hawāzin Qushayrī (d. 1072) frequently reduced pious and ascetic women, male youths, slaves and black individuals to one-dimensional trickster-types rather than portraying them as fellow aspirants on the Sufi path. Through a comparative investigation of depictions of other marginalized members of classical Islamic societies in Qushayrī's *Risāla* (Epistle on Sufism), I demonstrate how the gendering of female mystics and other members of the non-elite acts as a marker of difference from the default elite male norm. These markers of difference serve as a narrative tool in the hands of male authors to reinforce and perpetuate patriarchal social hierarchy and, therefore, obscure significant aspects of lived social history. Whether it be gender, skin color, social class, age, non-Arab origin or non-Muslim status, any marker of difference from the free male elite functions as a literary ploy that diminishes those on the margins while upholding social patriarchy. We thus further understandings of gendered social dynamics in eleventh-century Islamic societies by investigating all who did not hold a dominant position, whether socially or sexually, and how they are rendered effeminate and inferior in the writings of free, elite men who held hegemonic power.

Elite Muslim men regularly utilized gender as a language through which to explore relationships of power and dominance on every level of society. To illustrate the subtle mechanisms male authors employed to gender Sufi narrative, I first analyze depictions of mystic women, then young men who served older men as sexual partners (beardless youths),

slaves and finally dark-skinned individuals in Qushayrī's *Risāla*. By moving along the gender continuum from female to feminized male to masculine male slave and finally dark-skinned individuals, we proceed from the most obvious examples of gendering in Sufi literature to some of the more subtle gendering of these marginalized groups. This method demonstrates the pervasiveness of gendering as a narrative tool and discourse of power in Sufi writings. It also clarifies how gendering language is used to favor free, elite masculinity in Sufi circles of knowledge, thus offering a road map for readers who wish to use gender analysis in the study of classical Islamic narrative.

This chapter integrates Sufi primary sources, gender theory and analyses of trickster tropes in cultural storytelling to illustrate subtle mechanisms of gender narrative bias in early Sufi sources. By illuminating these hidden narrative mechanisms that differentiate the Other to center elitist androcentric spiritualities, I offer a way forward for those attempting to discern historical insights amidst an ocean of narrative constructions. In refining our ability to perceive the tropes that populate male depictions of marginalized individuals in early Sufi writings, we enable ourselves to look past these othering constructs to discover unique historical information buried and forgotten in the fine details of these anecdotes. When women, youths, slaves and black individuals are cast as deviations from the free, elite male norm in these sources, they serve as props for male spiritual advancement.<sup>3</sup> These “deviants” from the idealized masculine function as mirrors through which a free, elite, male Sufi aspirant may contemplate himself and arrive at inner transformation while obfuscating the Other's spiritual perspective. Therefore, despite some statements of spiritual egalitarianism in early Sufi literature, depictions of women and non-elite individuals in early Sufi writings primarily reinforced accepted social hierarchies placing free men at the top.<sup>4</sup> While these narratives emphasize deviances in gender, social class and/or age to reinforce ideal free male archetypes, they also offer a blueprint of narrative constructionism that is easily dismantled to unearth rich historical relics still embedded inside the stories that male Sufis tell of the Other.

### **Reconstructing Muslim women's history from androcentric narratives**

Female authors are conspicuously absent from classical Islamic literature. Therefore, we must rely on writings authored by elite, free men educated in androcentric institutions to reconstruct the lives and experiences of women and non-elite members of Islamicate societies. These non-elite members occupy the margins of society. Thus, their perspectives rarely carry weight in written histories. While female mystics preached in public forums to members of every class, their teachings survive only when free, elite men hear them speak and recount their teachings to other free, elite men. One of these men must then consciously decide to write these accounts down for them to survive the tides of narrated history. These accounts, even when recorded, do not arrive to us in a pristine form. Rather, women's teachings are filtered through the lens of the male writer. A common consequence of such filtering is the decentering of the original female author. In many cases, male authors choose to anonymize women, and some omit them completely.<sup>5</sup> Only a handful of male Sufi authors chose to memorialize their female counterparts at all.<sup>6</sup>

The inherent bias in these male-authored sources produce at best shadowy glimpses of women mired in historical inaccuracies. Thus, the life circumstances of these women are notoriously difficult to prove. To document something about the lives of these women, we rely on records that were kept in the hands of men who usually chose to exclude women from historical documentation. Male-authored texts, when they do engage women, emphasize

their roles as the mothers, wives, sisters or daughters of well-known Muslim men.<sup>7</sup> Thus, men often employ women in marginal, stereotypical ways in their writings, if at all. The lack of attention to female experience often strengthens male authors' presumption of an entirely male readership.<sup>8</sup> Even the most famous Muslim female mystic, Rābi'a 'Adawiyya (d. 801), retains very little of her personality, given the volume of androcentric legends that shroud her persona.<sup>9</sup> When women are cited in Sufi writings, authors name a handful of the earliest known female mystics and then record significantly fewer women after that.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, male authors usually name only Rābi'a 'Adawiyya in their Sufi writings, omitting all other women from Sufi records.<sup>11</sup> Thus, women are sometimes spoken about, but rarely emerge as viable interlocutors in Islamic discourse.

Sufi men varied in their levels of comfort with female inclusion in their writings. Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān Sulamī (d. 1021) and Abū al-Farāj b. Jawzī (d. 1201) seemed quite comfortable with memorializing female predecessors, citing the biographies of 82 and 240 women respectively.<sup>12</sup> Contrastingly, Qushayrī and Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 1209) seemed uncomfortable with the idea and often referred to Rābi'a 'Adawiyya alone in anecdotes (while citing no women in biographical genres). Most cited women anonymously. While some chose to memorialize women in their qur'anic commentaries (*tafsīr*), others cited women less formally in Sufi manuals and treatises. Most records come from the Sufi hagiographical tradition.<sup>13</sup> Sufi men's choice to include or exclude women from their hagiographies and narratives are always a highly deliberate exercise. By comparing Sulamī, the first Sufi writer to formally recognize female mystics and ascetics in the biographical genre of Sufi literature, and Qushayrī, Sulamī's devoted student, we notice just how deliberate the exclusion of women from Sufi literature can be.

### Teacher and student: inclusions and omissions

A side-by-side analysis of Qushayrī's *Risāla* (Epistle on Sufism) and Sulamī's *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* (The Generations of the Sufis) reveals very purposeful exclusions in Qushayrī's writings. These exclusions point to deliberate strategies involved in the compilation of Sufi biographies in the eleventh century. Qushayrī was the direct student of Sulamī and cites him as a teacher (*shaykh*) throughout both the *Risāla* and the qur'anic commentary *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt* (The Subtleties of Allusions).<sup>14</sup> Despite being heavily influenced by his teacher, Qushayrī opposes Sulamī on two major counts: the inclusion of women in Sufi lineages of authority (*silsila*) and the canonization of Maṣṣūr Ḥallāj (d. 922) as a Sufi predecessor.<sup>15</sup>

Sulamī pioneered two Sufi genres: *ṭabaqāt* (biographical compendia divided by generation) and encyclopedic *tafsīr* (Qur'anic commentaries that compile the sum of all known exegetical glosses by authoritative scholars).<sup>16</sup> In Sulamī's attempts to concretize Sufism as a valid movement amidst competing ascetic and mystical schools of thought in tenth-century Nishapur,<sup>17</sup> Sulamī took the comprehensive route and included every anecdote, exegetical gloss and biography he could find to establish a core canon of mystical predecessors and teachings.<sup>18</sup> As part of his attempts to ground Sufism in a tradition stretching back as far as Muḥammad, he included everything he could find on the earliest ascetic and mystic women in his *Dhikr al-niswa*. He also included the controversial figure Maṣṣūr Ḥallāj in his *Ṭabaqāt*,<sup>19</sup> despite his discomfort with the type of ecstatic, antinomian mysticism Ḥallāj came to represent.<sup>20</sup>

While Qushayrī repurposes much of Sulamī's biographical notices on male predecessors, Qushayrī blatantly drops Ḥallāj's biography from his entries, though he cites Ḥallāj's aphorisms profusely throughout the rest of his *Risāla*.<sup>21</sup> Since Qushayrī attempts to include

a biography of every Sufi authority he cites, his frequent citation of Ḥallāj *sans* biography speaks to his deliberate omission of him as a Sufi predecessor. We can attribute this omission to Qushayrī's determination to cast Sufis as orthodox Muslims, i.e. Muslims who uphold the laws and doctrines of Shafiite Islam.<sup>22</sup> This is most clearly seen in Qushayrī's choice to title his biographical section: *Fī dhikr mashāyikh hādhihi al-ṭarīqa wa mā yadil min sayrihim wa aqwālihim 'alā ta'dhīm al-sharī'a* (On the masters of this path and their deeds and sayings that show how they uphold the divine law).<sup>23</sup> Ḥallāj may have proven too antinomian for Qushayrī, jeopardizing Qushayrī's hopes of garnering Sufis orthodox status in a highly volatile political environment. Unlike Sulamī's comprehensive approach, Qushayrī sought a more cautious and highly selective approach to his inclusions. Similarly, while Qushayrī records a plethora of anecdotes about female mystics, they are noticeably absent from his biographical entries. Though Qushayrī cites Rābi'a 'Adawiyya and a host of anonymous women in his manual, he chooses to omit every one of these women from the biographical section of his *Risāla*. Given that Qushayrī made clear use of Sulamī's records of Rābi'a 'Adawiyya,<sup>24</sup> we must conclude that Qushayrī omitted the mention of women in his biographies deliberately. Qushayrī is one of several male authors who use Sulamī as one of their main sources but omit the names of the women Sulamī recorded in his *Dhikr al-niswa*. Thus, while Sulamī chose the comprehensive route to recording Sufi knowledge and included female mystics as well as Ḥallāj as predecessors of the tradition, Qushayrī chose a different route. Qushayrī's clear devotion to the *usulization* of the Sufi tradition,<sup>25</sup> perhaps as a result of the intense factionalism that plagued Nishapur in his lifetime, provoked him to defend ferociously his beliefs and doctrines as orthodox.<sup>26</sup> This made Qushayrī much more selective about whom to include as predecessors of the Sufi tradition. While Sulamī, too, wanted to bring Sufism in line with orthodox Sunnism, Sulamī sought to create a canon of mystical predecessors from whom to draw chains of transmissions. Qushayrī seemed more interested in limiting that pool of predecessors to those he could definitively argue were in alignment with the ethics and moral values of Shafi'i Islamic jurisprudence.

Different intentions seem to have spurred these male authors to include or exclude women. Though, we cannot account for hidden motivations, we can discern hints of intentionality. Men's inclusion of women or lack thereof has offered us insight into the gendered dynamics of these authors' milieu. When male authors exclude women, they do so knowingly. When they include women, they do so in specific ways that communicate subtle gendered mechanisms that restrict how women show up in these narratives. I explore some of these narrative mechanisms below.

### Typical depictions of female mystics

Aside from Rābi'a 'Adawiyya and a dozen or so others, most women remain unnamed in the tales told by Sufi men.<sup>27</sup> Male authors regularly depict strange, often anonymous women who show up to chastise a famous Sufi man then disappear without a trace.<sup>28</sup> These "upbraiding tales" as Laury Silvers calls them,<sup>29</sup> usually depict a sudden reversal of power designed to humble the male protagonist before a woman. These narrative anecdotes display a lot of parallels with trickster tales, particularly as women act as momentary "situation-inverters" that remind their male interlocutors of the idealized spiritual manhood they should be striving toward and of which they seem to be falling short.<sup>30</sup> Upbraiding tales rely primarily on an individual who represents a deviation from the elite male default to deliver, by way of paradoxically masculine acts of aggression and wisdom teachings, a reminder to both the male protagonist and the audience/reader that

things are not what they seem while simultaneously reinforcing how things should ideally be in a social patriarchy.

In a typical tale of upbraiding, a well-known Sufi man approaches a woman either to perform an act of chivalry or to criticize her for flaunting social norms (such as being abrasively loud or acting out in public).<sup>31</sup> The woman in response suddenly reveals extreme spiritual power and/or experiential wisdom, exposing the man's insincerity or incorrect perception of things. She then conveys to him a deeper truth that undermines the futile intellectualism he originally harbored. The male protagonist walks away humbled and ready to apply himself to further spiritual work.

Qushayrī and Ruzbihān Baqlī both relate a story about a woman who was publicly censured by Abū'l-'Abbās Dinawārī (d. c. 951) and proceeded to outwit him in a surprising way. Though each version of the story ends differently, both follow the same format and noticeably offer no details about the woman beyond her trickster-like response to Dinawārī's provocation. In both versions of this tale, an anonymous woman attends a public sermon and is censured by Dinawārī for openly exhibiting an ecstatic state. Dinawārī attempts to restrict her social rebellion, in Qushayrī's telling, by commanding her to die immediately (*mūṭī*), and, in Baqlī's by commanding her to cease her behavior at once (*qifḥī*). In Qushayrī's telling, she flaunts her superior spiritual power by dying on the spot. Thus, the anonymous woman responds to Dinawārī's ridiculous command by displaying her spiritual mastery over death. In Baqlī's retelling, the woman reveals her superior knowledge by providing a cryptic exegesis of the first letter (*qāf*) of the command to halt (*qifḥī*) that unequivocally demonstrates her lofty station and intimacy with God and contrasts this with his inability to discern the esoteric meaning of the Qur'ān's "disconnected letters" (*al-ḥurūf al-muqatta'a*), alluding to a common aspect of Sufi exegesis of the Qur'ān.<sup>32</sup> Qushayrī's version of the story reads:

I heard Shaykh Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami say: "One day Abu al-'Abbas al-Dinawari was delivering a sermon in his gathering. Suddenly, a woman yelled out of ecstasy. He told her: 'Die!' She stood up and went away. When she reached the door, she turned toward him and said, 'I have just died', and she fell on the floor, dead."<sup>33</sup>

Ruzbihān Baqlī retells the ending in the following manner:

As he said: I told her: Stop! (*qifḥī*). She said to me: The "*qāf*" is so that the renunciants do not stop at secrets (*asrār*), and they uttered this allusion (*ishāra*) as a warning against the approach of the ones who ascend. This is the way (*sunna*) of the Divine: He addressed the elite of his lovers with symbols and signs like the Disconnected Letters, which are symbols from the Real to his noble prophets and friends (*awliyā*) as a way of honoring them and recognizing their greatness above the rest of Creation.<sup>34</sup>

In both these accounts, the named male protagonist attempts to denigrate an anonymous woman in public only to be shamed by her unexpected response. The woman, unnamed, holds no spiritual authority in institutionalized Sufism. Meanwhile, Qushayrī remembers Dinawārī as a "distinguished scholar" and teacher of divine gnosis.<sup>35</sup> While women may narratively appear superior to men, they simply act as a vehicle for a male protagonist to discover his own spiritual arrogance and consequently integrate a deeper mystical teaching.

To understand why this anonymous woman holds no institutional authority despite her seemingly superior mystical status, we must investigate the gendered motivations of Sufi male authorship. In his magnum opus *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (The Revival of the Sciences of

Religion), Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī (d. 1111) explains the benefit of commemorating spiritual women to reinvigorate the spiritual efforts of male Sufi aspirants. Al-Ghazālī writes,

Consider the state of the God-fearing women and say (to your own soul); “O my soul, be not content to be less than a woman, for a man is contemptible if he comes short of a woman, in respect of her religion and (her relation) to this world.” So we will now mention something of the (spiritual) states of the women who have devoted themselves to the service of God.<sup>36</sup>

Kenneth Lincoln notes that tricksters often “inversely educate and amuse [...] people in tribal norms.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, to conceive of women as spiritually deficient but to then portray some women as extraordinarily spiritual and wise can easily be reconciled if these women are anonymized, rendered exceptions to the rule, and utilized as a means to a noble and edifying end. The noble end for a male Sufi adept is spiritual growth, and thus the goal of a male Sufi author is to utilize women as narrative props to aid the learning of male Sufis. Meanwhile, they can uphold the social patriarchal hierarchy by refusing to assign women any practical authority.

Ash Geissinger explains the stratification of classical Muslim societies as a hierarchy of power with free elite masculine men occupying the highest echelons. Geissinger writes,

Free, able-bodied males are seen as the most complete examples of what it is to be human, in their physical, intellectual, and spiritual capacities. Male and female bodies were thought to differ in degree rather than in kind... . Therefore, females were seen as intrinsically deficient.<sup>38</sup>

Such societies internalize a bipartite classification of all individuals as either “male” or “not male.”<sup>39</sup> With this in mind, gender becomes one of many possible markers of deviation from the ideal for male Sufi authors—other markers include class, age and political or religious status. Yet all these markers are gendered as deviations from the free male ideal. Any markers of deviation become a rhetorical device in the hands of male authors that use the Other as a corrective tool for reintegrating men into the hegemonic ideal. The use of women in Sufi tales is congruent with tricksters who often cross the boundaries of gender and toy with ideas of sacred and profane (or, in this case, social order and chaos), in order to deliver a moral ideal in a powerful and engaging way.<sup>40</sup>

Depictions of non-elite male individuals mirror those of female mystics. They demonstrate similar gendered narrative tropes, though the gendering of these characters is delivered in subtler ways. Ash Geissinger writes,

When utilizing gender as an analytical category, it is insufficient to single out female characters in a tradition or classical source for a gender-focused reading, while ignoring any other figures that might be depicted in the same text. Rather, all characters should be critically analyzed as gendered figures.<sup>41</sup>

In studying variously gendered figures, there is a distinct similarity between all characters who are not free, able-bodied, elite men in that all seem to possess the literary qualities of tricksters in the anecdotes that male Sufis choose to tell about them. Regardless of whether those markers of deviance rely on gender, social class, or age, these characters are decentered from the narrative while they deliver a moral corrective to free male Sufis by way of

momentarily behaving in unexpectedly aberrant ways. Structurally, there are few differentiating details between these tales despite differences in the identities of the upbraider. Female upbraiders flout social seclusion laws, young upbraiders defy their elders (particularly those who dominate them sexually), and slave upbraiders disobey and abuse their masters. Each of these social “deviants” aid the spiritual growth of the male protagonist through acting in ways unexpected of their gender, age or class. Consequently, they remind the male protagonist of his chivalrous ideals. Each of these non-default members of society transgresses their social boundaries in Sufi narratives to enrich the spiritual lives of their free male elite interlocutors by prompting them to recognize realities lie beneath the surface and motivating them to recommit themselves to their androcentric moral standards.

### Depictions of beardless youths

In the *Risāla*, Qushayrī alludes to the prevalent practice of older men sexually consorting with male youths in classical Islamic societies.<sup>42</sup> Qushayrī regularly cautions his readers against taking up a male youth as a lover.<sup>43</sup> Yet, despite deriding the practice, Qushayrī narrates the following tale about a male youth abusing his elder lover and portrays the couple as an analogy for the relationship between God as the ultimate Beloved and the lapsed Sufi devotee. In this tale, Qushayrī does not disavow the practice of pederasty, but rather uses the youth as a trickster-figure to deliver an important lesson about cultivating sincerity and faithful devotion in loving God. Qushayrī writes,

It is related that a beardless youth was seen striking an old man in the face with his sandal. Someone asked him: “Aren’t you ashamed? How can you beat this old man on his cheeks in such a way?” “His sin is great,” answered the young man. They asked: “What is that?” He answered: “This man claims that he desires me, yet he has not seen me for three nights!”<sup>44</sup>

As with the anecdotes related about mystic women, this story follows a very specific model. Someone criticizes the youth for behavior considered beyond his social station. The youth responds by revealing his intuitive and experiential understanding of what it means to sincerely desire your beloved. Qushayrī thus teaches his readers to fortify their relationship to God as the ultimate Beloved. This anecdote appears in a section immediately following Qushayrī’s exposition of impatience as a hallmark of the Sufi’s passionate yearning for God.<sup>45</sup> Thus, this beardless youth who displays power over his elder lover becomes a symbol of God testing human lovers to determine the depth of sincerity in their yearning.

The power of the story of the beardless youth lies in Qushayrī’s presentation of the youth as a feminized male behaving insubordinately by momentarily espousing the dominant masculine while, in turn, feminizing and diminishing his dominant sexual partner through an act of beating. In classical Islamic societies, pederasty was not considered a homosexual act. Though it occurs between two male individuals, the difference in age and often social status meant the youth was presumed to receive penetration while the older man enacted it. Thus, the older man, as the penetrator, reinforces his manhood, while the youth is feminized as the recipient of the sexual act. Similarly, adult males who enjoyed exclusively receiving penetration (*ubna*) were considered “effeminate” due to their submissive sexual position.<sup>46</sup> Regardless of whether the recipient of the phallus is an adult male, an adolescent male or a woman, the sexually dominant position represented hegemonic masculinity in Qushayrī’s milieu.<sup>47</sup> By presenting the insubordinate youth as the dominant enactor of violence on



the body of the older man, the typical pederastic situation is inverted and the older man is feminized through being the submissive recipient of the youth's beating. This gendered inversion serves Sufi pedagogy by offering a social paradox through which an elite man may contemplate his relationship to God.

Qushayrī values free elite masculinity highly and considers effeminacy and womanhood a mark of inferiority. Nearly two centuries later, Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240) writes, "men who are unable to meet the demands of the path of God are considered worse and lower than 'women.'"<sup>48</sup> Considering Ghazālī's utilitarian view of women cited above, we notice a clear continuity in the use of womanhood as a tool to denigrate men who fail to conform to idealized masculinity. Contrastingly, women whose spiritual accomplishments transcended their gendered social status were deemed "honorary men."<sup>49</sup> In this way, Sufi narratives engage in gendered discourse as a way of negotiating status, power and authority.

### **Depictions of slaves**

There are many Sufi tales that depict male slaves as tricksters and situation inverters who deliver a mystical teaching to their masters/other elite men in a manner consistent with what was stated above.<sup>50</sup> Kecia Ali notes male jurists have compared slaves to wives, given the relational inferiority of both groups to their free, elite male guardians in Islamic societies.<sup>51</sup> When Qushayrī narrates, "Yahya b. Ziyad al-Harithi owned a troublesome slave. Someone asked him: 'Why do you retain this slave?' He answered: 'In order to learn temperance through him,'"<sup>52</sup> we notice the same moral imperative that free, encourages elite male Sufi aspirants to treat subordinate inferiors as opportunities for spiritual growth. A male slave's position is gendered as a more limited form of masculinity in relationship to the master given the restricted rights a male slave possesses.<sup>53</sup> Thus, a male slave's defiance of his master in Sufi tales fits the trickster tropes we explored in narratives of female mystics by virtue of a slave's inability to fully espouse idealized masculinity while enabling his master to develop his own.

### **Depictions of black men**

Finally, I will address markers of deviance from idealized masculinity in free men as the subtlest form of gendering in Sufi narratives. In the following anecdote, Qushayrī marks a mysterious man as "poor" and "black."<sup>54</sup> These identity markers seem to have little to do with the plot of the story. Instead, these markers serve as a stark amplifier of the out-of-the-ordinary nature of what Abū Ḥasan Baṣrī (d. 981) witnesses. In this case, the paradox lies in a black individual Baṣrī assumed to be impoverished revealing himself to be spiritually powerful and incredibly rich when Baṣrī attempts to aid him with a charitable offering. Qushayrī relates:

I heard Abu al-Hasan al-Basri say: "At 'Abbadan there was a poor black man who used to frequent the [local] ruins. I took something with me and sought him out. When his eyes fell on me, he smiled and pointed with his hand toward the earth. I saw that the entire earth was covered with shining gold. He told me: 'Give what you have brought!' I gave it to him. However, his [spiritual] state frightened me so, that I ran away from him."<sup>55</sup>

Baṣrī narrates the tale such that a mysterious individual, marked deviant by his skin color and poor social class, reveals great spiritual power and diminishes the male protagonist's act of charity as a result. Qushayrī's note of the poor man's skin color is highly significant. Orfali



and Saab note that Qur'ān and prophetic traditions associate piety with “whitened faces,” and wretchedness with “blackened faces.”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Qushayrī uses these color symbols in his *Risāla* to depict unnecessary joy as a characteristic of the impious:

Abu Bakr al-Kattani said: “In a dream I saw a young man, the most handsome I had ever seen. I asked him who he was. ‘I am the fear of God (*taqwa*),’ he answered. ‘Where do you reside,’ I asked him. ‘In the heart of every sad individual,’ he answered. Then I turned and saw a black woman, as ugly as one can [possibly] be. I asked her who she was. She answered: ‘I am laughter.’ I asked her: ‘Where do you reside?’ ‘In every cheerful, carefree heart,’ she answered. When I woke up, I made a vow never to laugh, unless I am overcome [with laughter].”<sup>57</sup>

In another instance, Qushayrī chronicles the use of the phrase, “My God, make her black!” as a curse.<sup>58</sup> Thus, when a poor, black man surpasses Baṣrī in mystical state and material prosperity by producing gold from the earth with great spiritual mastery, we note another use of paradox to deliver a spiritual lesson through a narrativized character that is coded inferior to the masculine ideal through physical markers. Qushayrī’s depiction of laughter as an ugly, black woman to be avoided by Sufis demonstrates a case of gendering used to caution men against embracing joy in the material world. The use of a black man in a trickster role is a lesson to the reader that the spiritual is the invert of perceived reality. Thus, the poor may be rich and those with black faces (normatively symbolic of a “wretched spiritual state”) may have attained the height of spiritual perfection. When Baṣrī runs away from the poor black man, we see again how the individual constructed as socially inferior (gendered as a masculine subordinate in need of receiving charity from a free, elite man) demonstrates dominant masculine traits in the context of Sufi pedagogical tales that utilize situation inversion as a teaching tool. As is typical, Baṣrī receives biographical notice while the poor, black man remains anonymous.

## Conclusion

Many Sufi anecdotes that depict non-elite individuals retain three traits: (1) a free elite man is named while his non-elite counterparts are not, (2) the free man is bested by the direct, unmediated understanding of his inferior and (3) the free man benefits from the interaction while his inferior does not. While Roded has argued that Muslim women are unnamed in literature out of cultural respect for privacy,<sup>59</sup> the examples analyzed above reveal that the gender/age/social class of the Other is the only significant marker in the eyes of most male Muslim narrators. Their differentiating marker serves the narrative purpose and therefore their names need not be recorded.

When we compare Sufi male depictions of early, mystic women and their depictions of other minority subsections of society, we notice what happens when an educated free man contemplates the presence of those unlike himself. Such comparisons illuminate the depictions of early mystic and ascetic women and make it clear that the records we have of them are highly gendered and narrativized, though they remain useful in analyzing the literary constructions of free male Sufi authors and therefore assist us in removing the androcentric Sufi narrative lens to see what remains.

Analyzing free male depictions of non-elite and non-male subjects reveals that these anecdotes exist insofar as they offer these free male authors and presumed male readers an Other through which they can peer to discern where they themselves can better embody their free male spiritual ideals of *futuwwa* (chivalry). Thus, whenever an anecdote specifically

or deliberately identifies deviance in gender, social status or age—it almost always follows that the story will involve either reinforcement of social stratification or a superficial queering of this stratification that inspires free male readers to embody the ideals to which they must strive, thus ultimately reinforcing the status quo. There are few depictions of social deviants that fall outside of these constructions.

Schimmel states, “In chapter 17 of the *Fihī ma fihī*, Rumi writes that women exist solely as a prop with which to perfect oneself.”<sup>60</sup> To view women as bodies upon which men can practice cultivating spiritual virtues reduces women to a supporting role of aiding men upon their spiritual path while remaining themselves unchanged and unnamed. When Sufi authors attribute spiritual accomplishments to women and other non-elites, they depict them as particularly exceptional, thus rendering them different from the rest who are expected to enact their social roles without deviation. Given the fact that the early Sufi literature we have available is skewed in this general direction of depicting women as a member of the non-default and reinforcing the free elite man as the given reader and practitioner of Sufi mysticism, it is difficult to get an accurate sense of women as ascetics, mystics and Sufis. Still, we learn a lot about women in the Sufi male psyche from the literature we have.

While there is a variety of biographical information about Sufi women that does not necessarily follow this particular trickster mold (specifically, the women memorialized in Sufi literature evince a range of marital options including not being married at all), the fact that most of the narratives regarding these women echo similar themes that uphold the status quo indicates something of a *topos* representative of male social perspectives and largely devoid of women’s lived realities. Silvers has noted that Sufi men often read women as “marginal to the development, transmission, and preservation of Sufi practices, knowledge and teaching.”<sup>61</sup> Given that the same narrative purpose enacted by female characters is served by male slaves, youths and black individuals, we require more extensive research that investigates and analyzes the details that resist this narrativization in conjunction with historical traces of the lived realities of various outliers to social hegemonic classes. In this way, we can begin to unearth how women, slaves, youths, black individuals, non-Muslims, non-Arabs, the non-educated and other social “deviants” in Islamic societies lived, outside of the imaginations of the male authors from whom we inherited the bulk of our written records.

## Notes

\* I offer my deepest gratitude to Laury Silvers whose guidance was indispensable in this project. Any errors that remain are entirely my own.

1 Margaret Smith writes,

As far as rank among the ‘friends of God’ was concerned, there was a complete equality between the sexes. It was the development of mysticism (Sufism) within Islam, which gave women their great opportunity to attain the rank of sainthood.

*Muslim Women Mystics* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), p. 19. Cf. A. Schimmel and S. H. Ray, *My Soul Is a Woman* (New York: Continuum, 1997), p. 15 where Schimmel writes, “...there is one area in which the woman does enjoy full equal rights, and that is in the realm of mysticism, even if the perfect woman is still referred to as a ‘man of God.’”

2 Despite the difficulties of establishing the historicity of Sufi women’s lives, given the layers of androcentric narrative construction obscuring Sufi women’s history, Rkia Cornell has managed to collate all historically verifiable information on the most famous female Sufi, Rābi’a ‘Adawiyya (d. 801), in her monograph *Rabi’a from Narrative to Myth* (London: Oneworld Publications: 2019). There is sufficient preliminary scholarship on the lives and stories of early Sufi women, so the biographical details of Sufi women are not the focus of this chapter. Instead, this chapter can be read in conjunction with existing scholarship to aid understanding of the mechanisms of androcentric Sufi narrative. For historical information on the lives of female

- Sufis, see L. Silvers, “Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women,” *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): pp. 24–52; A. Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Knowledge in Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 108–143; R. Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections, from Ibn Sa’d to Who’s Who* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1994), pp. 91–113; and of course Rkia Cornell’s translation of Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Sulamī’s (d. 1021) biographical dictionary of female mystics, *Early Sufi Women* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1999).
- 3 Male depictions of non-elites are undoubtedly an inaccurate representation of the lived realities of women, youths, slaves and black individuals. It is well known, for instance, that women participated regularly in public preaching, networks of teaching and frequently flaunted aberrant behavior, despite their popular representation as domesticized passive social actors in written Sufi histories. See Silvers, “Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women” for some historical analysis of Sufi women’s lived realities. It is outside the scope of this chapter to investigate the historical realities of these othered populations.
  - 4 Ash Geissinger addresses the hierarchy of gender and power in Islamicate patriarchal societies in *Gender and Muslim Constructions of Exegetical Authority* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 35–38.
  - 5 This is the case with Umm al-Aswad, quoted as the author of an interpretive gloss on Qur’anic verse 15:85 in Sulamī’s *Dhikr al-niswa al-muta’ābiddāt al-ṣūfiyyāt* (Memorial of Sufi Female Devotees) and erased in favor of Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya in Sulamī’s *Ḥaqā’iq al-tafsīr* (The Realities of Exegesis). Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* (Cairo: Maktabat al-khānjī, 1969), p. 393. Cf. Sulamī, *Ḥaqā’iq al-tafsīr* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2001), 1:359.
  - 6 These include Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Sulamī in his *Dhikr al-niswa al-muta’ābiddāt al-ṣūfiyyāt* (Memorial of Female Sufi Devotees), Abū Nu’aym al-Isfahānī’s (d. 1038) *Ḥilyat al-awliya’* (The Adornment of the Saints), Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī al-Hujwīrī’s (d. ca. 1072) *Kashf al-Mahjūb* (The Revelation of the Veiled), Abū al-Farāj ibn Jawzī’s (d. 1201) *Ṣifat al-ṣafīya* (The Attributes of the Elect), Nūr al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jāmī’s (d. 1492) *Nafahāt al-uns* (The Moments of the Intimate), ‘Abd al-Wahhāb b. Aḥmad al-Sha’rānī’s (d. 1565) *Ṭabaqāt al-Kubra* (The Major Biographical Compendium) and ‘Abd al-Ra’uf al-Munawī’s (d. 1031/1622) *Al-Kawākib al-Durriya* (The Brilliant Celestial Spheres). See Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, pp. 92–93; Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, p. 43; Silvers, “Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women,” p. 24, n.2.
  - 7 Notice the frequency with which Sulamī identifies the women in his *Dhikr al-Niswa* by their relationship to Sufi men, including the sisters of Bishr al-Ḥāfi (Early Sufi Women, p. 192), the wife of Rudhbārī (Early Sufi Women, p. 186), the sisters of Darānī (Early Sufi Women, p. 194) and the daughter of Htrī (Early Sufi Women, p. 184).
  - 8 Qushayrī devotes a whole section of his *Epistle* to offering advice to spiritual novices whom he assumes, by default, to be male. He writes,

When the aspirant is tested by [worldly] renown, a secure and abundant livelihood, friendship with a youth, attraction to a woman or the [comforting] belief in an assured source of sustenance, and there is no master next to him who would suggest to him how to rid himself of this, then he should travel and move away from his place of residence, in order to distract his ego from this condition.

Note the androcentric assumption of the aspirant’s access to livelihood, travel and sexual attraction to women and youths. Qushayrī and A. Knysh, *Al-Qushayrī’s Epistle on Sufism* (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2007), p. 413.

- 9 Legends obscuring the original personality of the individual are not unique to female mystics. Dhū’l-Nūn Miṣrī, a famed black ninth-century mystic from Egypt, is similarly rendered mysterious given the proliferation of myths and legends about him.
- 10 Roded writes,

The dramatic drop in the number of second-generation female transmitters apparently reflects a general trend of relying on women as sources of information only when too few male informants can be found or when the women in question have a decided advantage.

*Women of the Biographical Tradition*, p. 47.

Roded notes a similar phenomenon in the Sufi tradition. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

- 11 Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d. 628/1230) includes only Rābī‘a in his Sufi biographies and composes a lengthy justification of his inclusion of a woman among the ranks of Sufi men. See ‘Aṭṭār and P. E. Losensky, *Farīd ad-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār’s Memorial of God’s Friends* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), pp. 97–113.
- 12 Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*; Roded, *Women in the Biographical Tradition*, p. 3.
- 13 Sulamī records dozens of women in his biographical compendium and yet only two are named in his qur’anic commentaries (Rābī‘a and Fāṭima Naysabūriyya). Male authors controlled which genres of literature Sufi women are included in and tended to favor citing women in popular genres like manuals and biographies over highly institutionalized and regulated genres like Qur’anic exegesis and hadith collections.
- 14 M. Nguyen, *Sufi Master and Qur’an Scholar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; London: The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2012), pp. 144, 254–255. Knysh writes in his introduction to his translation of Qushayrī’s *Epistle* that Sulamī “is quoted on almost every page of the *Epistle*.” A. Knysh, “Translator’s Introduction,” *Al-Qushayrī’s Epistle on Sufism* (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2007), p. xxi.
- 15 Tradition has Hallāj martyred for ecstatically exclaiming divine theophany. See L. Massignon, *The Passion of Hallaj* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). On ecstatic utterance, see C. W. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985).
- 16 For more on Sufi biographical compendia, see J. A. Mojaddedi, *The Biographical Tradition in Sufism* (Richmond and Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001). Walid Saleh pioneered the classification of *tafsīr* as encyclopedic when exegetes attempt to collect all previously known glosses on a qur’anic verse. See W. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), pp. 17–21.
- 17 C. Melchert, “Sufis and Competing Movements in Nishapur,” *Iran* 39 (2001), pp. 237–247.
- 18 I discuss Sulamī’s project of concretizing Sufism and its implications for institutionalized Sufism in “Mystical Qur’anic Exegesis and the Canonization of Early Sufis in al-Sulamī’s *Ḥaqā’iq al-tafsīr*,” *The International Journal of Religion in Society* 23:4 (2016), pp. 14–22.
- 19 Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, p. 236. Entry number 53. While there is debate about Hallāj being considered a Sufi, given the many Sufis who fervently excluded him from their ranks, he remains a significant figure in the Sufi tradition, as evidenced by Sulamī’s inclusion of him even while addressing his tenuous position among the Sufis of his time. Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 236.
- 20 Sulamī’s *Ghalaṭāt al-ṣūfiyya* (The Errors of the Sufis) reveals he lectured his students on certain behaviors he considered antithetical to “true” or Malamāti Sufism. See A. Arberry, “Did Sulamī plagiarize Sarrāj?” *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* .3 (1937), pp. 461–465. Also J. A. Qureshi, “The Book of Errors: A Critical Edition and Study of *Kitāb al-aḡhālīt* by Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021),” MA Thesis (University of Missouri-Columbia), 1999.
- 21 Mojaddedi notes,

a decision was made to omit al-Hallāj from the *ṭabaqāt* section, while leaving segments about him in other sections of the *Risāla*, [which] implies that his inclusion would have conflicted with the aims particular to the *ṭabaqāt* section of the work.

*The Biographical Tradition in Sufism*, p. 104.

- 22 M. Nguyen, *Sufi Master and Qur’an Scholar*, pp. 205–209.
- 23 Qushayrī, *Epistle on Sufism*, p. 17.
- 24 Compare Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 389; Qushayrī, *Epistle*, p. 156. Also, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 389 and *Epistle*, p. 277.
- 25 Vincent Cornell coined the term “usulization” to describe attempts to integrate the principles of Islamic jurisprudence into all sciences by identifying authoritative chains of transmission and tracing knowledge back to the prophetic tradition (*sunna*). Cornell, “Defining Muslim Networks,” p. 44. Rkia Cornell explains how Sulamī pursued usulization in Sufism in *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 37–40.
- 26 Nguyen, *Sufi Master and Qur’an Scholar*, pp. 36–42.
- 27 Silvers notes:

These women’s names were not just dropped from biographical collections: a number of transmitters also edited women’s stories to shift a male Sufi to the center of the narrative and pushed a now unknown woman to the margins to play a supporting role.

In “Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women,” p. 36, n14.

- 28 Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2007), p. 306. Maybudī and W. C. Chittick, *The Unveiling of the Mysteries and the Provision of the Pious* (Louisville: Fons Vitae; Amman,

- Jordan: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2015), p. 469. Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-Bayān* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmīya, 2008), 1:124.
- 29 L. 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), p. 55.
- 30 W. G. Doty, "Mapping the Characteristic of Mythic Tricksters: A Heuristic Guide," in *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), p. 37.
- 31 See Sulamī's accounts of Ghufayra and Sha'wana, both of whom wept themselves blind and responded to male critics with wisdom teachings, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 96 and 106, respectively. Laury Silvers records Sha'wana's heated encounter with a male critic in "Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women," p. 50. Rābi'a Azdiyya rebuffs a man's attempts to marry her and demeans him in the process, *Early Sufi Women*, p. 128. Fātima Naysabūriyya rebukes Dhū'l-Nūn for refusing a gift from a woman, *Early Sufi Women*, p. 142. Qushayrī recounts more of these upbraiding tales, while anonymizing the women involved. See Qushayrī, *Epistle*, pp. 117, 183, 185.
- 32 On Sufi interpretations of the Disconnected Letter (*al-ḥurūf al-muqatta'a*), see M. Nguyen, "Exegesis of the *ḥurūf al-muqatta'a*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 14.2 (2012), pp. 1–28.
- 33 Qushayrī, *Epistle*, p. 314.
- 34 Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-Bayān*, 1:134. I owe a debt of gratitude to Nevin Reda for refining my original translation of this excerpt.
- 35 Qushayrī records a short biography of Dinawārī in his *Epistle*, p. 71. The anonymous woman, of course, has no biographical record, though Sulamī includes a variant of these events under the entry for Maryam Basriyya: "It is said: One day she attended the session of a preacher. When he started to speak about love, her spleen ruptured and she died during the session." *Early Sufi Women*, p. 84. There are some indications that Maryam is the woman in these anecdotes, but not enough historical record survives to evidence this. However, Sulamī's version records Maryam's sudden death as a mark of her spiritual connection to the subject matter of the sermon. Meanwhile, Qushayrī portrays the anonymous woman's death as an act of spite to outwit a man who attempts to restrict her ostentatious spiritual behavior.
- 36 Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*, p. 353.
- 37 K. Squint, "Gerald Vizenor's Trickster Hermeneutics," *Studies in American Humor* 3.25 (2012), p. 109.
- 38 A. Geissinger, *Gender and Muslim Constructions of Exegetical Authority*, p. 35.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Squint, "Gerald Vizenor's Trickster Hermeneutics," p. 108.
- 41 A. Geissinger, "No, a Woman Did Not 'Edit the Qur'ān': Towards a Methodologically Coherent Approach to a Tradition Portraying a Woman and Written Quranic Materials," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85.2 (June 2017), p. 420.
- 42 These boys were often termed "beardless youths" to indicate their adolescent status. Bruce Dunne offers a thorough analysis of pederasty in Islamicate societies in "Homosexuality in the Middle East: An Agenda for Historical Research," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 12.3 (Summer 1990), pp. 55–82.
- 43 Qushayrī writes, "Seeking the company of youth is one of the gravest afflictions on this path." *Epistle*, p. 411.
- 44 Qushayrī, *Epistle*, p. 200.
- 45 Ibid., p. 199.
- 46 Dunne, "Homosexuality in the Middle East," p. 59.
- 47 Note that Qushayrī warns his male readers against consorting with women and male youths, thus equating the two as temptations for men pursuing a spiritual life. *Epistle*, 413.
- 48 Schimmel records several more examples of deficient men being denigrated as women in *My Soul Is a Woman*, pp. 76–80.
- 49 See 'Aṭṭār's characterization of Rābi'a in *Farid ad-Din 'Attār's Memorial of God's Friends* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), pp. 97–113.
- 50 See the story of the slave and the dog in Qushayrī, *Epistle*, p. 260.
- 51 K. Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 6.
- 52 Qushayrī, *Epistle*, p. 256.
- 53 Geissinger, *Gender and Muslim Constructions of Exegetical Authority*, 46.
- 54 While there were black elite members in Islamicate societies (and extreme reverence for Bilāl, the dark-skinned companion of Muḥammad, see Qushayrī, *Epistle*, p. 166), famous black author Jāḥiẓ

- (d. 255/868) wrote a treatise called “The Glory of the Black Race”—indicating the prevalence of contemporary discourse that discriminated against particular individuals based on their skin tone.
- 55 Qushayrī, *Epistle*, p. 368. Silvers writes, “In some of these stories, black skin seems to articulate the ideal of spiritual poverty by connecting the lowest social status...with the highest spiritual status.” “Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women,” p. 43.
- 56 Sīrjānī, B. Orfali and N. Saab. *Sufism, Black and White: A Critical Edition of Kitāb al-Bayāḍ wa-l-Sawād by Abū l-Ḥasan al-Sīrjānī (d. ca.470/1077)* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), p. 13.
- 57 Qushayrī, *Epistle*, p. 402.
- 58 *Ibid.*, p. 392.
- 59 Roded, “Preface,” *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, p. viii.
- 60 Schimmel, *My Soul Is a Woman*, p. 74.
- 61 Silvers, “Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women,” p. 25.