

WOMEN AND THE WINDOW OF GOD'S LOVE IN SUFISM

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we will discuss the role and metaphysical position of women in the Sufi tradition, a tradition that has been rarely heard. The main focus of this article is how women shifted from being followers to leaders in spiritual activities, especially in institutionalized Sufi activities. Not only that, women can also be a source of inspiration for great Sufi figures such as Ibn Arabi and Jalaluddin Rumi. Although initially looked down upon and associated with the term *nafs* (low soul), the Sufi tradition has positioned women as the most perfect manifestation of God's beauty (*jamal*). These female Sufi figures include those from the Prophet's family: Khadijah, Fatimah, and Aisha. In the subsequent development of Sufism, there are figures who become symbols of love for God, such as Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah and Fatimah of Nishapur Cordova. This article shows that on the mystical path, gender is not a barrier to the highest spiritual attainment. Men and women are born and have the same rights in all fields, including in the religious/Sufi field, which we understand as spiritual equality.

Keywords: *Sufism, Women, Spiritual Equality*

Abstrak

Dalam artikel ini, kita akan membahas peran dan posisi metafisik perempuan dalam tradisi Sufi, sebuah tradisi yang jarang dibahas. Fokus utama artikel ini adalah bagaimana perempuan bergeser dari pengikut menjadi pemimpin dalam kegiatan spiritual, terutama dalam kegiatan Sufi yang terinstitusionalisasi. Tidak hanya itu, perempuan juga dapat menjadi sumber inspirasi bagi tokoh-tokoh Sufi besar seperti Ibn Arabi dan Jalaluddin Rumi. Meskipun awalnya dipandang rendah dan dikaitkan dengan istilah *nafs* (jiwa rendah), tradisi Sufi telah memposisikan perempuan sebagai manifestasi paling sempurna dari keindahan Tuhan (*jamal*). Tokoh-tokoh perempuan Sufi ini termasuk mereka yang berasal dari keluarga Nabi: Khadijah, Fatimah, dan Aisyah. Dalam perkembangan Sufisme selanjutnya, terdapat tokoh-tokoh yang menjadi simbol cinta kepada Tuhan, seperti Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah dan Fatimah dari Nishapur Cordova. Artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa di jalan mistik, gender bukanlah penghalang untuk mencapai pencapaian spiritual tertinggi. Laki-laki dan perempuan dilahirkan dan memiliki hak yang sama di semua bidang, termasuk di bidang keagamaan/Sufi, yang kita pahami sebagai kesetaraan spiritual.

Kata-kata Kunci: *Sufisme, Perempuan, Kesetaraan Spiritual*

INTRODUCTION

The search for God is fundamentally inherent in every human being. Both men and women have equal rights and obligations in their spiritual journey. This also applies to the world of Sufism, or what we know better as Tasawwuf (Maulana, MI, 2018). Women's presence in Sufism is perceived as having a broader scope than in other areas of life. Women are not merely passive followers, but can also position themselves as spiritual leaders who determine the direction of Islamic spiritual development, particularly in Sufism (Adams, CH, 2013). Concrete evidence of the consideration of women's role in the world of Sufism is the birth of the concept of *Hubb*, or pure love for God, pioneered by Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah (95-185 H / 713-801 M). From Rabi'ah, we learn about the paradigm shift in worship, from one based on fear of hell to one of devotion that does not expect a reward from the one and only God. As time progressed, the role of women became increasingly significant, as evidenced by the significant amount of institutional support and tangible spiritual guidance they received. Many upper-class women donated funds to build Sufi houses, or *khanqahs*, and some became leaders (*shaykas*) in certain monasteries. Women's spiritual influence extends beyond the public sphere; they also exert a strong influence within the smallest unit of society, the family.

As mothers, women were the primary teachers and schoolmasters for great Sufis, as illustrated in the story of Ibn Khafif, whose mother received divine light on the night of *Laylat al-Qadr*, surpassing her son's asceticism (Adams, CH. 2013).

Amidst the numerous works on in-depth studies of Sufism, in-depth studies that emphasize women's participation in the world of Sufism are still very limited in number. However, this fact on the ground cannot be used as an excuse to say that Sufism or Islam in general ignores the role of women (Maulana, MI. 2013). It would be unreasonable if the data in the literary world were considered as evidence that there was a sidelining of the role of women in the world of Sufism, because the Qur'an itself affirms the equality of position and role of women in the spiritual journey of humanity (Maulana, MI. 2018). There are many verses that explain the equality between men and women both in their status as human beings and their roles in life. Among them is QS. Ali Imran verse 195 which means "Indeed, I do not waste the deeds of those who do good among you, whether male or female" (Ali Imran, 195), or also in QS. Al-Ahzab verse 33 with the translation "Forgiveness and great reward are prepared for the servants of Allah—both men and women—who show real piety. This includes those who are firm in their faith, obedient in their worship, correct in their speech, patient in facing trials, and humble. Likewise for those who like to give alms, consistently fast, maintain their own glory, and always wet their tongues by saying the name of Allah" (Maulana, MI. 2018). From the translation of QS Al-Ahzab verse 33 above, it clearly explains the equal position of men and women in spiritual life towards their Lord.

This article is expected to carry a fundamental mission to restore and revive the "existential glow" of women who tread the silent path of Sufism, a spiritual entity whose contributions and inner track record are often buried under the dominance of overly masculine historical narratives. Through in-depth research, this book seeks to uncover the veil that has so far covered the hidden treasure of female Sufi wisdom, ensuring that their clear and wise voices are no longer merely footnotes, but become the main axis in our understanding of the Islamic mystical tradition. Rediscovering their stories is not only a matter of historical documentation, but an effort to restore spiritual dignity to recognize that inner achievement knows no gender boundaries, so that the light they radiate can once again illuminate the hearts of God-seekers in the modern era.

Furthermore, this entire work is a manifestation of a profound sense of reverence and respect for the feminine dimension, which inherently holds a highly esteemed position in Sufi cosmology. By sharing fragments of the lives of these female figures, the author instills a spirit of hope that women's participation in the architecture of human spiritual development can continue to flourish and gain greater space in the future. This narrative emphasizes that feminine tenderness and steadfastness are crucial instruments in discerning divine secrets that are often difficult to grasp through rigid logic.

The central focus of this discussion is the profiles of these resilient women who have dedicated their lives to bearing witness to absolute Truth through spiritual experiences that traverse various realms of consciousness. Emphasis is placed on how their inner struggles to conquer their egos and attain closeness to the Creator serve as authentic proof that spiritual authority can be attained by anyone who is sincere. By highlighting their achievements and sacrifices, this text invites readers to reflect on the fact that witnesses to true Truth are those who are able to harmonize mystical experiences at various levels of reality with concrete, compassionate actions in this world.

METHOD

Research Method This research uses a qualitative method with a library research approach. Primary data is sourced from Camille Adams Helminski's work, "Women of Sufism: A Hidden Treasure". The data analysis technique is carried out through philosophical and historical content analysis, where the author conducts an in-depth study of women's intellectual contributions in the transmission of hadith and interpretation, as well as the ontological position of women in Sufi metaphysical texts.

DISCUSSION

The birth of Sufism was not solely driven by men; women also played a significant role. Early in Islamic history, we see women as key contributors to the acceptance of revelation. Khadijah bint Khuwaylid was not only the Prophet Muhammad's wife, but also the first to testify to his mystical experience in the Cave of Hira. Khadijah supported, encouraged, and reassured the Prophet when he experienced confusion and doubt after receiving his first revelation (Maulana, MI). Khadijah was the first to acknowledge Muhammad's prophethood and to confirm the Prophet's mystical experience of receiving revelation. numbered sequentially and referenced in the text. If any data are secondary or adapted from another source, the source should be cited clearly.

We can say that if Khadijah lacked inner strength in living her Islamic life, she might have taken the wrong path. Khadijah indirectly applied the aspect of sakina or divine tranquility. She was the Prophet's refuge, which in Sufism is often likened to the soul's return to a peaceful resting place in God (Adams, CH. 2013). This was the beginning of Khadijah's role as a female guardian of the "Divine Light" which continued into the following centuries. Furthermore, Khadijah also passed on her spiritual talents to her daughter, Fatimah, as the Prophet's daughter and wife of Caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib. Because of her ascetic lifestyle and also her closeness to the Prophet Muhammad (the first Murshid in the Sufi order lineage), it is natural that Fatimah had a strong inclination in the spiritual dimension of Islam, especially the world of Sufism. Fatimah is often referred to as the "Leader of Women in Paradise" because of her close relationship with the Prophet, making her a key link in the transmission of spiritual light (nur) to subsequent generations through the lineage of the Imams (in the Shia tradition and many Sufi orders) (Adams, CH. 2013).

Although classical Sufi literature has attempted to document the history and practices of early Islamic spirituality, the representation of female figures in it remains very minimal compared to male figures. This disparity is evident in various primary texts. For example, Abu Nu'aim al-Isfahani's *Hilyat al-Awliya* lists only 28 women out of a total of 649, while Abdurrahman Jami's *Nafahat al-Uns* lists 35 women compared to 564 men. A similar pattern is found in Abdul Wahab al-Sha'rani's *Tabaqat al-Kubra* (16 women out of 412), where the majority of female figures mentioned are relatives of the Prophet, companions, or figures immortalized in the Qur'an. This gender gap is even more extreme in other works; Abu Qasim al-Qushayri's *al-Risalah* lists no female Sufis among its 83 names. Likewise with *Kashf al-Mahjub* (12 women out of 109 figures), *Tadzkirat al-Awliya* (only 1 woman out of 72 figures), and al-Bayad wa al-Sawad who recorded 8 women among 478 men" (Sillers, Laury. 2013).

Although the existence of female Sufis has been documented in several specialized biographical works—such as Abdurrahman al-Sulami's *Dhikr al-Niswa al Muta'abbidat al-Sufiyyat*, Ibn al-Jawzi's *Sifat al-Safwa*, and Muhammad ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqat al-Kubra*—their existence has received little place in the main literature of Sufism. Authoritative texts such as Abu Talib al-Makki's *Qutul Qulub*, al-Sarraj's *Kitab al-Luma'*, and al-Hujwiri's *Kashf al-Mahjub* tend to only briefly cover legendary figures like Rabi'ah Adawiyah and other female Sufi figures from the early development of Sufism (Sillers, Laury. 2013). More information about the role of women in the Sufi world can be seen in the works of al-Sulami and Ibn al-Jawzi, in both works above it is explained that a number of famous Sufis have tried to teach spiritual knowledge to women (Sillers, Laury. 2013). In some of the facts written in the books that the author has mentioned above prove that women indirectly became marginalized in the practice and process of teaching Sufism at that time. However, although only a few manuscripts mention the names of women who have played a role in the teaching of Sufism, these manuscripts remain evidence that women also have a role in the teaching and practice of Sufism (Sillers, Laury. 2013), the existence of women can be seen textually and contextually.

Among the many spiritual figures, the name of Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah (95-185 H / 713-801 M) remains immortal to this day. This Sufi saint's life is recorded in classical Sufi texts passed down through generations, where elements of reality and myth often blended due to the evolving narrative (Smith, 1995). Her primary identity was a lifestyle of asceticism and a profound spiritual longing for the Creator. Coming from a poor family in Basrah in the early 8th century, she experienced a dark period as a victim of kidnapping and slavery. However, thanks to the depth of her faith and sincerity in her worship, she was eventually freed by her master.

After gaining her freedom, Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah (95-185 H / 713-801 M) chose a life of asceticism and celibacy in Basrah. Margaret Smith (1995) notes that her residence became a destination for many spiritual seekers, including such great figures as Malik ibn Dinar, Sufyan Thauri, Abdul Wahid ibn Zayd, Rabah al-Kaysi, and Shakik al-Balkh. In a fragment of her story, she was once offered to ask her friends for material assistance to ease her burdens. However, she refused on principle: if she felt embarrassed to ask Allah, the Owner of the universe, for worldly pleasures, then she was even less willing to ask His creatures. Regarding this steadfast stance, Malik ibn Dinar also related a narration that states:

Once, Malik ibn Dinar visited Rabi'ah's home. There, he found the house in dire condition: a cracked jug for purification and drinking, a worn-out mat, and a brick used as a headboard when resting. Feeling compassion, Malik offered his assistance, saying, "I have connections with wealthy people. If you wish, I can ask them for help."

Rabi'ah then responded with a question, "O Malik, isn't the Lord who provides for me the same as the Lord who sustains them?"

"Of course," Malik replied.

Rabi'ah continued, "Then, will Allah ignore the poor simply because they are in need, and instead only pay attention to the rich because of their wealth?"

"Of course not," Malik retorted.

"If so," Rabi'ah asserted, "why should I complain about my situation to Him when He knows everything? I am content with all His decrees, for whatever He wills is also my will." (Smith, 1995).

From the above narration, we can see that the special thing about Rabi'ah is her love for Allah, which she manifested in its purest form, as a love that was implemented because of Allah Himself, not because of other reasons other than Allah. Below we attach several poetic prayers from Rabi'ah al-Adawiyya (95-185 H / 713-801 M);

In her prayer, Rabi'ah expressed her detachment from worldly rewards and the hereafter. She asked that all worldly pleasures that were her share be given to those who shun God, while her heavenly bliss be reserved for His beloved servants. For her, God alone was the only sufficient goal. She further emphasized the purity of her love: if her worship was based on fear of hellfire, she was willing to burn in it; and if her goal was only the hope of paradise, she was willing to be kept away from it. However, if her love grew purely for God alone, she asked that she never be prevented from beholding His beauty (Nicholson, 1914).

From the statement above, we can say that Rabi'ah al-Adawiyya (95-185 H / 713-801 M) totally "rejected" the world and ambitions of the afterlife. By giving her share of the world to the enemies of Allah, she showed that the world was worthless before Rabi'ah. By giving her share of heaven to the saints of Allah, she showed that she did not seek heaven, but only desired the owner of heaven, who is none other than Allah. Likewise, from the second poem, we can conclude that Rabi'ah al-Adawiyya did not expect a reward in heaven for her love for Allah, as we can analogize the relationship between an employer and an employee, where the employee works to earn money. However, Rabi'ah did not expect anything for her love for Allah, it was pure love, and we understand it as the true essence of Sufi metaphysics. We cannot explain in detail what this form of love that does not expect anything is because we humans still expect a reward for what we do, just as servants still hope for heaven as a reward for all the deeds we feel are good.

Furthermore, we can say that Rabi'ah al-Adawiyya (95-185 H / 713-801 M) is a central figure who provides "absolute legitimacy" for women's spirituality. This legitimacy is not obtained through social permission or formal law, but through spiritual achievement that transcends gender boundaries. Rabi'ah (95-185 H / 713-801 M) emphasized that the relationship between servants and God is at the level of the soul, not the body. Rabi'ah (95-185 H / 713-801 M); also legitimized the position of women by changing the paradigm of worship that is not based on the law of cause and effect (worship and then receive a reward in heaven) but because of pure love for God, because before Rabi'ah was born, the concept of Sufism was fear (khauf) - wanting heaven and fear of God's hell, on the contrary, after Rabi'ah al-

Adawiyya (95-185 H / 713-801 M); was born, the concept of Sufism changed to Mahabbah, which is pure love for God without any reasons.

In addition to Rabi'ah al-Adawiyya (95-185 H / 713-801 M), another female Sufi figure from Khurasan, Fatimah al-Naisaburiyyah (d. 223 H) was mentioned above. She was a female scholar who had attained the level of knowledge (*kânat minal 'ârifât il kibâr*). She was one of the most prominent figures in medieval Sufism. She was not merely an ascetic, but a theosophical thinker whose thoughts greatly influenced such great figures as Bayazid al-Bistami and Dhu'n-Nun al-Misri (180 H/796 M- 246 H/856 M) (Adams, CH. 2013). In Fatima's Sufism, she offered the concept of *sidq*, or inner honesty, which is the foundation of all spiritual attainments. She taught that a servant should not have a duality between what appears on the outside and what is in the heart. Dhu'n-Nun al-Misri (180 H/796 M- 246 H/856 M), considered Fatimah as his spiritual teacher and called her the most excellent person he had ever met. Dhu'n-Nun often sought advice from her, and Fatimah al-Naisaburiyyah (d. 223 H) once advised him to make "truth" (*sidq*) an obligation and to kill the ego in actions and words. It is written in a narration, Fatimah Nishapur advised Dhu'n-Nun al-Misri (180 H/796 M- 246 H/856 M) that a person has not reached the truth if he still seeks recognition from people or feels proud of his deeds of worship (Adams, CH. 2013). *Sidq* means acting only for Allah, in such a way that the ego (*nafs*) is completely "dead" in every action.

Fatimah al-Naisaburiyyah (d. 223 H) was known for her courageous discussions with the great male teachers of her time, demonstrating her spiritual authority, which transcended the social gender boundaries of that century. She was also the wife of the Sufi saint Ahmad Khidruya, yet she is often portrayed as having a stronger spiritual personality and guiding her husband. This demonstrates that women can be equal to men in spirituality. They even have the right to be teachers for both men and women. Broadly speaking, Fatimah al-Naisaburiyyah from Nishapur (d. 223 H), Rabi'ah al-Adawiyyah (95-185 H / 713-801 M), and her female Sufi colleagues not yet mentioned in this article represent the pinnacle of women's spiritual legitimacy, where their authority is universally recognized by the Sufi community regardless of gender, because for them, God's light has no gender (Adams, CH. 2013).

Fatimah al-Naisaburiyyah from Nishapur, Khurasan-Iran (d. 223 H) not only taught Sufism orally, but also taught Sufism through written works. These works, consisting of excerpts from poetry, sacred songs, and teachings, demonstrate the depth of her theosophical experience and expertise in other Islamic sciences such as *hadith*, *tafsir*, and *fiqh*, although her focus remains on the esoteric dimension. Women not only served as practitioners but also contributed to the Sufi literary and philosophical heritage. From the works mentioned above, it is clear that Sufi women tended to teach Sufism through poetry. They believed that poetry was a sacred medium that directly connected the servant with God. In writing, they used figurative language appropriate to the themes of Sufism at the time. For example, the theme of "shawq," or the servant's longing for the Divine Beloved, is very intimate between the servant and God. There is also the theme of "fana," the annihilation of the self, and "baqa," the eternity of the self. *Fana* literally means to disappear, to be destroyed, or to vanish. In Sufi poetry, *fana* describes a state in which self-identity (*ego/nafs*) is destroyed so that there is no longer a barrier between the servant and the Creator (Adams, CH. 2013). Meanwhile, we understand *baqa* as a new "life." *Baqa* is a state in which the servant "remains" with God after he has passed the phase of self-annihilation (Adams, CH. 2013). If we look deeper, we will realize that Fatimah al-Naisaburiyyah Nishapur (d. 223 H) practiced the concept of "baqa" in her Sufism teachings. This is because she did not just remain silent in spiritual ecstasy, but she

moved in the world as the "hand" of God to guide others (Adams, CH. 2013). He remained active in teaching and guiding even though he had reached a high spiritual level.

In the development of his teachings, there is a concept of spiritual lamentation which is not a form of despair, but rather a manifestation of deep longing and love for the Creator (Adams, CH. 2013). Some examples of the expression of spiritual lamentation include the birth of the term "tears as the main language of prayer", according to them crying is the highest form of devotion of the servant to his God. It is narrated that Sha'wana cried continuously because he felt limited before God and deeply longed for unity with his Creator. He argued that eyes separated from their Beloved could not help but cry. Overall, the teachings of spiritual lamentation emphasize that the voice (through song) and tears (through prayer) are bridges that connect the emptiness of the human self with the fullness of God's existence.

In fact, there are other teachings in the form of sacred songs and prayers, but we cannot detail them all. Broadly speaking, female Sufis expressed their teachings through two methods: written and oral. The written form is embodied in poetry, while the oral form is embodied in musical forms, such as sacred songs and the spiritual laments we mentioned above. Their purpose in using these two methods is simply to demonstrate that their use of esoteric sources is not merely supplementary but a crucial element, providing a profound emotional nuance to works within the world of Sufism.

CONCLUSION

From the various descriptions presented above, it can be concluded that women have been an important and inseparable part of the Sufi tradition since its inception. Although often "hidden" from formal historical records dominated by men, their spiritual contributions are profound and form the foundation of Sufism itself. Spiritual achievement is measured by clarity of heart and closeness to God, not gender. The lack of written information about women's contributions in Sufi texts cannot be used as an argument to deny their significant role in spreading Sufi doctrine and tradition. Women have equal rights in all matters, including in the Sufi world; they have the right to become teachers or students according to their abilities. Without the role of women, the Sufi world would lose half of its light. The presence of women provides a balance between the dimensions of Jalal (Greatness/Firmness) and Jamal (Beauty/Gentleness). Revaluing the role of women in Sufism is key to a more inclusive, profound, and loving understanding of Islam.

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