

# On Spiritual Subjects: Negotiations in Muslim Female Spirituality

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## *Abstract*

This paper applies reading strategies adapted from feminist philosophy to the discursive construction of women as spiritual subjects in a Sufi narrative. The aim of this reading is first, to show the challenge women's spiritual excellence presents to normative representations which privilege male spirituality, and then to illustrate the ways in which women's spiritual excellence is negotiated in the text, at times challenging but generally reaffirming patriarchal distinctions between masculinity and femininity. To do this, the paper offers a deep reading of Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's textualization of Rabī'a al-'Adawiyya using the cosmological gender of Sufi thought and reading methods drawn from feminist philosophy. It reads the male/female duality of 'Aṭṭār's text for the assumptions, the imaginaries and metaphoric networks, and the silences that inform the representations of Muslim female spirituality. In 'Aṭṭār's construction of a metaphoric spiritual masculinity, we are made to see Rabī'a's spirituality as an illustration of gender performance. Even though he does not go as far as we might want, 'Aṭṭār shows us how it is possible to be in the way that men "naturally" are while being embodied as women "naturally" are. In casting a woman as a man Aṭṭār appeals to the subtext of a Sufi cosmology of genders, to metaphors of masculinity and femininity and to ideas of affect and receptivity in order to construct a body such as Rabī'a's in masculine ways. Thus, he pays homage to Rabī'a's spiritual agency, and that of other women like her, but does so without relinquishing the spiritual superiority that he associates with the male body. The effect of the analysis is to illustrate the complex and contested representation of female spirituality in Islamic thought, and in doing so to also locate contemporary negotiations of female spiritual agency along an historical trajectory of negotiation.

## **Introduction**

This article focuses on the construction of female spiritual subjectivity in an instance of sufi thought through the application of feminist reading strategies to the representation of a notable sufi, Rabī'a al-'Adawiyya (d. 185/801). The aim is not only to illustrate the challenge women's spiritual excellence presents to normatively male representations of spirituality,

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but also to show how the contestations of female spiritual excellence are not negotiated simply. The aim in doing this is two-fold; firstly to illustrate the complex operations of thought employed in representing Muslim women's spiritual excellence in a masculine paradigm, and in doing so to also locate contemporary negotiations of female spiritual agency along an indigenous trajectory of historical negotiation. The paper analyses the discursive construction of the feminine in Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's (d. 618/1221) textualization of Rabī'a al-'Adawiyya<sup>2</sup> using reading methods drawn from feminist philosophy, namely Luce Irigaray and Michelle Le Doeuff. Reading through the movements of masculinity and femininity it unpacks the assumptions, the imaginaries and metaphoric networks, and the silences that inform the vision of Muslim female spirituality represented by 'Aṭṭār.<sup>3</sup> In 'Aṭṭār's construction of a metaphoric spiritual masculinity, we are made to consider Rabī'a's spirituality as an illustration of gender performance.

## Feminist Reading Strategies

Feminist philosophy suggests that to deconstruct the power of discourse is to offer a specular or self-reflecting analysis of the subject of discourse. For Luce Irigaray, the speaking subject necessarily draws nourishment from "matter" that allows it to make systematicity and representation possible. In the absence of historical women's writings, and in order to seek out historical understandings of the feminine, feminist analysis through historical text must rely on a number of innovative reading methods. Amongst these is a reading technique that examines what Irigaray calls "*the "grammar" of each figure of discourse*". Such reading examines the 'syntactic laws' that representation relies upon, the 'imaginary configurations', and 'metaphoric networks', as well as what is not articulated at the level of utterance: the silences of discourse. The goal, she explains

... is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth or of a meaning that is excessively univocal... [We] should not put it, then, in the form "What is a woman?" but rather, repeating/interpreting the way in which,

<sup>2</sup> Farid al-Din 'Attar, "Rabi'a: Her Words and Life in 'Attar's Memorial of the Friends of God," trans. Paul Losensky with Michael Sells, in *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings*, ed. Michael Sells (New York: Mahwah Paulist Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985). Michell Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.* Trans. Trista Selou (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991). See Silvers (2007) for a discussion on the 'gender cosmology' of Sufism.

within a discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject ... (emphasis in the original).<sup>4</sup>

Remaining with the idea of 'the imaginary', Le Doeuff has employed it as a rhetorical term that constitutes the assumptions upon which a text rests, namely narratives, figures, imagery, and pictorial or analogical structures within knowledges which indicate an 'intellectual and political elision'.<sup>5</sup> The imaginary, she explains,

marks those places within texts where the discourse is unable to admit its founding assumptions and must cover them. It signals, thus, a crucial vulnerability within texts and arguments, a site for what remains otherwise unspeakable yet necessary for a text to function.<sup>6</sup>

My task in this paper is to employ these reading methods for the ways in which the feminine finds itself defined in 'Aḥḥār's historical narrative of *Rabī'a*. I make apparent the negotiated representation of female spirituality and draw attention to the contested nature of femininity in discourse on women's spirituality.<sup>7</sup>

## Reading for Woman

Before we enter into the text, we must note our use of feminist reading strategies. Reading classical texts for the portrayal of sex-difference and gender is easily reduced to anachronism when we read to affirm or challenge contemporary ways of thinking. To avoid the anachronism, the challenge of feminist reading and writing is to locate the texts, as far as possible, in their own milieu, in terms of time and space. Our distance in terms of both makes an unmediated reading almost impossible. To alleviate the challenge to the extent possible and to allow contemporary readings of the past that do not reduce us to a similar silence in the present, feminist reading methods are invaluable. Rebecca Flemming (2000), in her assessment of Thomas Laqueur's (1990) formidable thesis on a medieval single sex biology, warns us that "just as the Aristotelian body is not the body of modern sex in any number of ways" so too what "bears down upon the body" is hard to think of as gender in an analytic

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<sup>4</sup> Irigaray, *This Sex*, 74-80.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989). Grosz explains that Le Doeuff's concept of the imaginary is different from Lacan, who uses the imaginary to refer to the formation of the ego and the development of two person relationships.

<sup>6</sup> Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, xix.

<sup>7</sup> See the reading methods that Luce Irigaray provides in *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985) and the suggestions Michele Le Doeuff makes in *Hipparchia's Choice* (1991).

sense (Flemming 2000:16). We may benefit from similar cautions, namely against the sense that we may have full knowledge of the intimacies of the historical writer's minds. We know too that credible scholarship cannot emerge from an uncritical application of contemporary categories onto historical sites.

Further, it is tempting to suggest that historical understandings of the world were markedly inferior to ours. Theories of historicism and modernisation may even require that we argue for modern progress over historically less enlightened or less expansive views of the world. In this sense, present day theories of gender and sex-difference frequently work on the premise that today's gender arrangements are a vast improvement of historical arrangements, and they may well be, but our distance from that history limits what we may validly say about it. In the study of Islam especially, the narrative of historical progress is a tempting one, even as we try to mediate the biases of historicism and orientalist understandings of Muslim women's lives. By contrast, normative Muslim thought works with a reverse premise for the development of gender relations, viz. that historically, Muslim communities offered greater rights to Muslim women than were then present in non-Muslim communities, that historical communities were more observant of Islamic norms and that the present day practices are a demotion of the past (Badawi 1995, Doi 1992). Present day reforms, they argue, are primarily the result of Muslim submission to pressures of western rights-based social norms, inherently inimical to the Islamic system of rights. Furthermore, to normative narratives, critical reformist Muslim scholarship argues for reform in contemporary Muslim practice to come closer to the divine message of gender equality, which some argue has never been realised (Barlas 2002, Wadud 1999).

Without suggesting a reversion to historical inequalities, we do, following Le Doeuff and Irigaray, have reading strategies that enable in-depth and nuanced readings of the historical feminine. These strategies make obvious, as far as they can, the operations of the "grammar", the "imaginary configurations", and the "metaphoric networks", as well as the silences and the political elisions that manage the "scenography that makes representation possible".<sup>8</sup> I have relied on them here not without a deep awareness of the distance that stands between us and the text, both chronologically and experientially.

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<sup>8</sup> Irigaray, *This Sex*, 75 and Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, xix.

## Textualising Rabī'a

What might these spaces be? I would like to venture into some of the spaces that Sa'diyya Shaikh (2009) and the other scholars here have opened, to explore what some of these possibilities may be through a thirteenth century chronicle of the life of the most prominent female Sufi. When Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār set upon the task of chronicling the lives of seventy-five Sufi teachers he included amongst them only one woman, Rabī'a al-'Adawiyah, a female Sufi accredited with originating the doctrine of pure love.<sup>9</sup> While the biographies of women were not unusual in literary practice at the time, 'Aṭṭār's presentation of Rabī'a in a collection of male biographies indicates that he was also aware that including Rabī'a in his collection would also require a defence to explain "why her memorial is placed among the ranks of men". This he does by prefacing her entry with an introduction spanning three paragraphs that also serves as a defence of Rabī'a's presence in his text. His introduction to the entry on Rabī'a reads thus:

Veiled with a special veil, veiled with the veil of sincerity, burned up in love and longing, enamoured of proximity and immolation, lost in love-union, deputy of Maryam the pure, accepted among men, Rabī'a al-'Adawiyah – the mercy of God most high upon her.

If anyone asks why her memorial is placed among the ranks of men we reply that the chief of the prophets – peace and blessing upon him – declares: God does not regard your forms. It is not a matter of form but of right intention, if it is right to derive two thirds of religion from 'A'isha Sādiqah<sup>10</sup> – God be pleased with her – then it is also right to derive benefit from one of his maidservants. When a woman is a man on the path of the lord Most High, she cannot be called a woman.

Thus it is that 'Abbāsah al Tūsī said: "When on the morrow plain of resurrections they call out 'O men', the first person to step on the plain of resurrection will be Maryam". When Ḥassan Baṣrī would not hold a meeting unless a certain person were present, then certainly that person's memorial can be entered in the ranks of men. Indeed, when it comes to the truth, [*ḥaqīqa* ʔ], where this folk is, there is no one – all are unity. In unity how can your existence or mine remain, much less "man" or "woman"? As Abū 'Alī Fārmadī, God's mercy upon him, says, "Prophecy is the essence of might and sublimity, Noble or common do not enter in it". Thus being God's friend is also exactly like this. This is especially so for Rabī'a, who in her age had no equal in proper behaviour or mystical knowledge. She was esteemed by the great

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<sup>9</sup> Shaikh (2009) lays out these ideas and explores their potential for rethinking dominant understandings of gender within Islamic law.

<sup>10</sup> Sells translates this as *Ṣādiqah*, though Attars text says *al-Ṣiddīqa*. Thanks to an earlier reviewer for noting this discrepancy.

people of the age and was a decisive proof for those who lived in her time.<sup>11</sup>

In the first two paragraphs of the entry on Rabī'a 'Aṭṭār justifies her presence in the section on men, and throughout the introduction we observe 'Aṭṭār's skilful arguments as he attempts to make place for a woman in a text that privileges male mystics. To a degree he attempts reframing normative understandings of gender difference and to a degree he re-inscribes these.

While it might first appear that 'Aṭṭār's narrative resists the normative association of spiritual excellence exclusively with men, as he includes Rabī'a amongst the great male Sufi's, to understand if it is indeed that he intends to disrupt this normative association requires we examine how he includes her. The introduction begins with honorifics that highlight her femininity through her veil and her love, and he associates her with Maryam who occupies the highest ranks of spirituality in the Qur'anic worldview. Next he dismisses the objections to Rabī'a's presence in a listing of male Sufis in three ways arguing namely that "God does not regard forms"; 'A'isha was a source of religion; and Rabī'a "cannot be called a woman". His first and last arguments affirm Rabī'a in spite of her gender, and the second argument affirms Rabī'a through her gender. While the tone of the introduction is consistently apologetic, 'Aṭṭār achieves the inclusion of Rabī'a' in a list of male Sufis.

'Aṭṭār's most striking justification for including Rabī'a amongst the notable male Sufis is that upon her pious path, Rabī'a was a man and not a woman. He says of her "(w)hen a woman is a man on the path of the lord Most High, she cannot be called woman". For Sachiko Murata (1992), Annemarie Schimmel (1997), and Rkia Cornell (2007) this may be an effective response to Rabī'a's femaleness; the masculine framing of women amounts to elevating her from the lowliness associated with femaleness to the heights of maleness.<sup>12</sup> Sa'diyya Shaikh, however,

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<sup>11</sup> 'Attar, "Rabi'a: Her Words", 155.

<sup>12</sup> Sachiko Murata's work is one of the earlier broad ranging English language studies of the feminine in Islam. Applying Taoist symbolism to Sufi texts, Murata frames the relation between male and female as a hierarchy reflecting the dualistic *jamālī* and *jalālī* attributes of God and presents a theory of complementarity of males and females as two created genders based on an implicit hierarchy of male to female. Annemarie Schimmel's (1997) overview of women and spirituality in Islam also employs a thesis of complementarity based on spiritual equality and natural subordination. While both analyze the many ways in which Islam and Sufism give value to women, femininity and female ways of being, neither Murata nor Schimmel have broken free from a perjorative explication of femininity as something to be surmounted and overcome, whether in the ordinary course of life or upon the spiritual path. The argument they advance retains a view of male and female as a difference of degree, much like the Aristotelian notion of difference where the claim that two

reminds us that the masculine framing of accomplished Sufi women is “double-edged”. While it recognizes women’s spiritual agency, it also

reflects the pervasiveness of patriarchal ideology where spiritual mastery is fundamentally connected to men... Iconoclastic women can only be understood if they are somehow seen to abandon their womanhood and take on male personae.<sup>13</sup>

Unable to cast Rabī’a’s spirituality in normatively masculine ways, ‘Aṭṭār’s strategy is to cast her as male. What does this imply for Rabī’a’ as a woman? To answer this we need to take a few steps back and ask what prompts ‘Aṭṭār to contemplate Rabī’a as “a man on the path of the lord Most High”? Is it the fact that she is on the spiritual path and to be on the path is to be figuratively male? Many other women were Sufis, too, and not all of them were presented as Rabī’a was, i.e. in male form, and so it does not seem that the path requires gender specificity, even though its aim may be to produce the ideal Sufi which, by some accounts, is also a man (Schimmel 1997). Silvers (2007, 1-2) explains that while some female Sufis who “mastered their souls” were considered “‘men’ on the path”, typically, exceptional women in the early periods of Islam were “called the best of all men and women”. In the shifts between masculinity and femininity, biographers such as ‘Aṭṭār illustrate their operative hierarchy of sex difference. In so doing they reveal the ‘founding assumptions’ as well as the ‘crucial vulnerability’ within the text. What prompts ‘Aṭṭār’s statement is that Rabī’a’s way of being on the path is only explicable if she is not seen as female. Rabī’a’s way of being on the path is not a way of being ordinarily associated with women, and is different enough to warrant it not being considered female. The way in which ‘Aṭṭār’s arguments for Rabī’a’s place in his chronicle works with ideas of masculinity and femininity, male and female bodies, and male and female ways of being disrupts this “natural” association of bodies, genders, and desires. In disrupting seemingly natural associations that link certain bodies with certain genders, he subsequently disrupts the link between certain bodies and certain appropriate desires. Yet, following Shaik’s advice, it would be incorrect to consider this disruption a simple affirmation of female spirituality.

## **Sufi Narratives of Sex Difference**

Analysing women’s spirituality through a study of Sufi approaches to gender difference suggests a variety of gendered subjectivities. Murata

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things are equal is not necessarily incompatible with the claim that one of the two is better than the other.

<sup>13</sup> Shaikh, “In Search of al-Insān: Sufism, Islamic Law and Gender,” 17.

and Schimmel, and later scholars too (Lutfi, 1985; Moris, 1992), explain the Sufi women's gendered subjectivities in terms of complementarity, however differently presented.<sup>14</sup> More recently scholars have developed further alternatives for understanding gender difference in Sufi thought (Shaikh, 2009; Silvers, 2007).

Drawing on Murata, Laury Silver's (2007) explains the "cosmological gender" paradigm of Sufi literature in terms of a tripartite collective of the spirit, the soul and the body through a dynamic of masculinity and femininity that functions at the cosmological level, which is also somehow connected with more mundane and material expressions of gender.<sup>15</sup> The spirit is thought to be effective and masculine.<sup>16</sup> The body, in contrast, is receptive and feminine while the soul is not specifically gendered.<sup>17</sup> The Divine too is "never specifically gendered either masculine or feminine", rather it is known through either the masculine names of majesty (the *jalāli* names) or the feminine names of beauty (the *jamāli* names).<sup>18</sup>

Jamal Elias (1988) employs a similar gender cosmology. He produces a complementarity framework in the dynamic of transcendence and immanence while also making a distinction between the "physical woman and ideal woman" as "the female and the feminine". The physical woman or the *Muslima* (the Muslim woman) is the one whose lower self prevails over her spiritual nature and so she is inferior to men in her spiritual and intellectual abilities;<sup>19</sup> in Shī'ī thought she is Fatima, "the

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<sup>14</sup> The undercurrent is discernible in both texts. Refer to the conclusions of each book for more on this.

<sup>15</sup> Silvers, "Representations: Sufi Literature," in *EWIC*, 5:535.

<sup>16</sup> Silvers, "Representations: Sufi Literature," in *EWIC*, 5:536.

<sup>17</sup> Silvers, "Representations: Sufi Literature," in *EWIC*, 5:536.

<sup>18</sup> The binaries are dynamic and relational and not static or rigid associations of specific genders with specifically sexed bodies. So, instead of maleness, the fact that a thing produces effects in something else constitutes it as male and rather than femaleness, the fact that it receives effects constitutes it as female (Silvers, "Representations: Sufi Literature", in *EWIC*, 5:535-6). The masculinity and femininity assigned to the names suggests a scheme of binary pairs, the foundation of which is the binary of receptivity and effect wherein to be receptive and to be affected by something is represented as feminine and to be effective and to have an effect on something is represented as masculine. This binary also directs the subjective positions between the Divine and the spirit, the soul and the body. To contemplate the Divine is to be receptive to the Divine and receptivity is feminine, thus "all of creation is female" with regard to the Divine (Silvers, "Representations: Sufi Literature", in *EWIC*, 5:537).

<sup>19</sup> She follows her faith and practices its rituals "albeit in a lesser capacity than her Muslim [male] counterpart" (Elias, "Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism", 210). She is the subject of Qur'an 2:228, the one to whom "men have a degree above" (Elias, "Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism", 209: note 1). She has diminished status in religious



perfect expression of the human self” and in Sunni thought she is Maryam, “the human spirit filled with Divine light”.<sup>20</sup> In this gender cosmology, the individual male Sufi occupies that space above the physical women and below the celestial feminine which resides above man (as Adam) and beneath God.

Elias’s distinction between the physical and the celestial highlights both the affirmative and the prejudicial uses of femininity in Sufi thought. Moris, too, reads the “symbolic function of woman” in Sufi literature both “positively as the symbol of Divine mercy and negatively as the source of concupiscence and therefore of dissipation of the soul”.<sup>21</sup> Silvers and Shaikh have similarly recognized the multivalent nature of gender in Sufi literature. Silvers recalls the various “equitable, admiring, and misogynistic depictions” of women. Drawing on Ibn ‘Arabi, Shaikh argues for Sufi readings as potentially productive of “an egalitarian politics of gender”.<sup>22</sup> She argues that the Sufi critique of egoism and suspicion of social power may provide useful spaces from which to challenge male superiority and gender discrimination (p.#). In Shaikh’s reading, the gender affirmative subjectivities of Sufism are also potential further resources for gender affirmative subjectivities in law. However, Shaikh also indicates that the “tensions between patriarchal inclinations and gender-egalitarian impulses” do not allow us to gloss over the claims to male superiority that often feature in Sufi literature.<sup>23</sup>

Whether in the “yin yang” framework of complementarity that Murata uses, the “different but equal framework” that Schimmel uses, the notion of whole and part employed by Lutfi or the notion of polarization and competition between genders that Moris uses, the complementary models of gender contrast against the multivalent models that Silvers, Shaikh and Elias suggest. Both the models of a complementarity and multi-valence offer valuable resources for theorising gender difference and female subjectivity, to imagine and at times re-imagine gender at the

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matters, being responsible for having Adam thrown out of paradise, causing the argument between Abel and Cain and, in some Sufi literature, she is the cause of “all mischief” (Elias, “Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism”, 220-1).

<sup>20</sup> Elias, “Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism”, 218. She is the ideal beloved, Layla; she is the symbol virtue and divine compassion (Elias, “Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism”, 209). She is that which is realized in divine mercy. According to Elias, in Sufi literature “the physical woman as human being is minimized so that [as a wife] she becomes an accessory to the course of events in a mystic’s life”. She is the “profane impinging upon the sacred” (Elias, “Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism”, 214).

<sup>21</sup> Morris, “The Sufi Perspective on the Feminine State”, 48.

<sup>22</sup> Shaikh, “In Search of al-Insān: Sufism, Islamic Law and Gender”, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Silvers, “Representations: Sufi Literature”, in *EWIC*, 5:535, and Shaikh, “In Search of al-Insān: Sufism, Islamic Law and Gender”, 2.

physical and cosmological levels, revealing what Shaikh calls the potential of Sufi thought to produce “fulfilling and affirmative gendered subjectivities”.<sup>24</sup> ‘Aṭṭār’s discussion shows some of these imaginings at work, specifically in the disruptions he effects on the seemingly natural connection between bodies and their spiritual performances.

## Performing Spirituality

Butler’s challenge to the ‘naturalness’ of what we consider the sex of a body, illustrates that the body too is a discursive construct; gender functions as “discursively constrained performative acts” that produce the “body through and within the categories of sex”,<sup>25</sup> thus the sex of a body (and not just the gender of a sexed body) is iteratively and discursively constructed.

Rather than being an expression of [immutable] sex, gender produces sex. Masculinity and femininity are learned bodily performances that masquerade as natural by invoking bodily markers [primary and secondary sex characteristics].<sup>26</sup>

For ‘Aṭṭār, to be figuratively male implies performing in ways characteristic of men and not characteristic of women. And yet Rabī’a conducts this performance (i.e. her male-like way of being on the path) as a female, defined as such by a female body; indeed she can only be “*like* a male” because she *has* a female body (both italics are mine). When ‘Aṭṭār calls her ‘a man on the path’ he also recognizes that her actions do not conform with her body. And Shaikh reminds us, ‘Aṭṭār must work within an anthropological scheme that cannot align femaleness into the “ideal of human perfection”.<sup>27</sup> Against this dilemma, ‘Aṭṭār’s few short paragraphs are a rich repository of the ‘imaginary’ that informs him, and of the silences that inhibit his text. It is a maze of statements and counter-statements that both construct and deconstruct Rabī’a as a male and a female. Through his introduction to Rabī’a, ‘Aṭṭār makes and unmakes genders, disrupts and reaffirms normative associations of bodies and genders, and dispels and then reclaims the associations of body, gender and desire. His narrative is clearly a struggle; ‘Aṭṭār is trying to write Rabī’a in such a way that he is firstly able to include her in a text dedicated to male spiritual excellence, and

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<sup>24</sup> Shaikh, “In Search of al-Insān: Sufism, Islamic Law and Gender”.

<sup>25</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xxviii

<sup>26</sup> E. Armour and S. St. Ville, *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006): 5.

<sup>27</sup> Shaikh, “In Search of al-Insān: Sufism, Islamic Law and Gender,” 17.

secondly to do so without completely departing from even his own normative understandings of masculinity and femininity. 'Aṭṭār's two challenges, then, are first to textualize Rabī'a amongst men using normative notions of masculinity without departing from normative understandings of gender, and second, to do so even as he challenges these.

We begin with 'Aṭṭār's second challenge: to simultaneously challenge and remain within at least some normative understandings of gender and difference. To do this, 'Aṭṭār begins in the traditional way of introducing a master. Rabī'a's name is preceded by embellishments intended to enhance the reader's regard for her. Within each of these embellishments there is a discernible tension between what is expected of women and the exceptional way in which Rabī'a represents this expectation. She is "veiled", as women often are, but he qualifies his statement by explaining that hers' is "a special veil, a veil of sincerity". Her veil is burned because of love, yet it is no ordinary love. Not unlike the stereotype of the emotional woman, she is indeed lost in a love-union, but it is not an ordinary love-union. It is a love-union where Rabī'a's love is the love for proximity with the Divine. These unique ways of veiling and loving bring her into the company of good women and so she holds the rank of being in the company of the most privileged of women, Maryam. But, he reminds us, even Maryam "is accepted among men", and thus returns to the normative masculine.

'Aṭṭār establishes for his reader that he is indeed speaking of a woman. Simultaneously, he also tries to dislodge his reader of some normative notions of what it is to be a woman – veiled, lost in love and, to be like other women (rather than the male companions that constitute the remainder of his book). Rabī'a is typically female in all of these aspects, but in a very untypical or special way. Through these slight locutionary tensions 'Aṭṭār eases his reader into his presentation of Rabī'a. He focuses on normative notions of femininity, while simultaneously challenging them in unexpected ways. Rabī'a is veiled, but in a special way; Rabī'a is in love but in the best way; she shares the ranks of other women, but only the very best of women, in fact of a woman who is also accepted amongst men. 'Aṭṭār wants to make space for Rabī'a without losing his reader.

The tension continues into the next paragraph, and reflects 'Aṭṭār's first struggle: to textualize Rabī'a amongst men using normative notions of masculinity since the criteria for textual presence in this book is masculinity. To achieve this he shifts the focus from Rabī'a's femininity; instead he seems to rid her of it and cast her in a male form as far as this

is possible. He first argues that her form is irrelevant and then establishes her masculine credentials until he almost completely dislodges her femininity by casting her as a male until “she cannot be called a woman”. I will return to a detailed discussion of this statement shortly. For now, I focus on how ‘Aṭṭār develops Rabī’a’s male credentials. He associates her with Maryam, who, though also a woman like her, is “accepted among men”. Maryam is indeed the first among men. He also associates her with Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, a respected male Sufi. Finally, he dislodges her female form completely when he explains that in mystical unity male and female forms do not endure. ‘Aṭṭār’s achievement here is in clearing a space in his reader’s mind for a woman who acts like a man is expected to act. But ‘Aṭṭār does so without making this way of being female seem abominable; instead, he naturalizes it by relying on precedence and past authority.

In saying that we cannot speak of Rabī’a as a woman, is ‘Aṭṭār contesting what it is to be a man? Or is he contesting Rabī’a’s bodily form; is he asking whether Rabī’a should be considered a man or a woman in the form of her body? If it is the former, then ‘Aṭṭār is offering the possibility that masculine traits are not exclusive to masculine bodies; for the further effect of framing her in masculine terms is to open the possibility of the disruption of the seemingly natural association of masculinity with a masculine body, and similarly femininity. In the positive associations of femininity as veil and love, we see affirmations of women’s ways of being spiritual. These initially promising associations are unfortunately quickly relinquished: ‘Aṭṭār does not go as far as we might hope; instead what he is alluding to is what he and others view as a mismatch between Rabī’a’s female body and her spiritual perfection. For ‘Aṭṭār, Rabī’a is *like* a man and this implies she can no longer be associated with the body of a woman in the natural association of women with female bodies. For Rabī’a’s way of being to make sense to a hierarchical and patriarchal understanding of sex difference requires that her way of being is first dissociated from women’s ways of being and next become associated with men’s ways of being. Thus, Rabī’a’s female spirituality is discursively deconstructed, decoupled from femininity and reconstituted and coupled now with male spirituality. If, as Butler contends, masculinity and femininity are “learned bodily performances”, learned ways of being which masquerade as natural ways of being, “premised upon bodily markers”, then in ‘Aṭṭār’s construction of a metaphoric spiritual masculinity, we are made to see Rabī’a’s spirituality as an illustration of gender performance. Even though he does not go as far as we might want, ‘Aṭṭār shows us how it is possible to be in the way that men “naturally” are while being embodied as women “naturally” are. In casting a woman as a man ‘Aṭṭār appeals to

the subtext of a Sufi cosmology of genders, to metaphors of masculinity and femininity and to ideas of affect and receptivity in order to construct a body such as Rabī'a's in masculine ways. Thus, he pays homage to Rabī'a's spiritual agency, and that of other women like her, but does so without relinquishing the spiritual superiority that he associates with the male body.

## **Citational Bodies**

However, 'Aṭṭār's recasting of Rabī'a, similar to the recasting of Sufi women as men in other contexts, is never complete. Bodies (and the sexed nature of bodies) are also discursively constructed through citation and iteration of norms (Butler). The body has a citational value which Aṭṭār struggles with here; to cite a female body is to cite the history associated with female bodies. In iteration, however, there is simultaneously a possibility for disrupting norms. 'Aṭṭār's iterations of gender binaries, dichotomies, preferences and statuses is full of subversions as well as conformances, demonstrating the very intricate ways in which citation creates space for disruption while it also opens a space for reaffirming norms. 'Aṭṭār uses both these potentials productively. By reconstituting Rabī'a as male 'Aṭṭār does two things; first he reaffirms a superior value for the male form over the female form, and second he also suggests that form is immaterial – a person in a woman's body may also be a man. Similarly, recalling Maryam as “the first person” in “the ranks of men” he disrupts the normative association of a female body with the category of femaleness. Nonetheless, he still asserts the superiority of being “among the ranks of men” over being amongst the ranks of women. While he upsets the association of genders and bodies, he does not dispel the superiority of the male gender, even as he questions the superiority of the male body. When he connects Rabī'a's significance with her relationship with Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, he shows Rabī'a as a person of such high regard as to have captured the mind of a venerable male Sufi. Other narratives of the fictional associations of Hassan and Rabī'a where her spirituality supersedes his may be material there,<sup>28</sup> but here 'Aṭṭār associates Rabī'a with Hassan in order to validate her. He grants her status through her association with him and again 'Aṭṭār challenges and then reaffirms the hierarchy of these two genders.

His final defence is to challenge the role of the material difference between nobles and common people, the self and the other, and the male and the female in judging spiritual worth. 'Aṭṭār's aim here is to

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<sup>28</sup> Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for this insight.

erase the effects of these material forms of difference. Yet, once again, by referring to these as polarities he also reminds his reader of the differential values assigned to these different material forms; reminding us how citation may simultaneously affirm and resist the normative, we cannot escape the greater value he assigns to the noble, the self and the male, and, most importantly for us in this instance, the lower value he assigns to being female.

The value of citation in affirming the normative means that we may also read 'Aṭṭār from a different perspective in that he not only validates Rabī'a through masculinity, but it appears as though he also recognizes the value of her femininity upon the spiritual journey. This occurs in two ways: through his portrayal of Rabī'a as a unique individual with no equal in her time, and his recognition of a historical precedent of female excellence in 'A'isha. In both instances 'Aṭṭār focuses on Rabī'a as a woman amongst women and seems to be arguing for her virtues as a woman. Religious knowledge has historically been associated with 'A'isha and in this regard Rabī'a is portrayed as being much like 'A'isha. This is the only aspect of 'Aṭṭār's justification that is free of the tensions that run through the remainder of the two paragraphs. His reference to 'A'isha amounts to an affirmation of femininity in itself and in regard of a woman as a woman. In this instance 'Aṭṭār is actually successful in disrupting the prejudicial view of Rabī'a's female form. Elsewhere he values her because she is 'like a man', she is 'not a woman', because her form is irrelevant, because she has relations with other important men, because she is uncharacteristic of women and because she is unique amongst women. This is the only place where his assessment does not try to explain away Rabī'a's femaleness.

Despite his attempt to subvert normative gender identities, and the recognition of the value of female qualities, we couldn't say that, in his justification for including her amongst the great male Sufis, 'Aṭṭār was successful in presenting a notion of gender difference that recognized the fullness of Rabī'a's femaleness. The challenge that Rabī'a presents to those who try to explain her excellence is to conceive of Rabī'a as an individual whose particular way of being leads her to the state of spiritual excellence reflected in her spiritual journey. While 'Aṭṭār's narrative, and other narratives of the genre that cast notable women as men may generate a space wherein gendered subjectivities have the potential to be constructed in fluid and contingent ways, normative gender hierarchies of maleness and femaleness persist and indeed prevail. Unfortunately the feminine that Ibn 'Arabi imagines has remained marginal and has not come to fruition. The subject of Sufi literature remains the male Sufi and the central subjectivity that continues to

dominate the literature remains prejudicial to the female subject. So Rabī'a is not the normative female, nor is she the normative male, and she is not even the normative Sufi. Rabī'a remains the aberrant female as she remains the aberrant Sufi.

To read Rabī'a's metaphoric masculinity as only an indicator of a privileged male normativity is, however, to discount the complexity and the multiple valencies of gender that 'Aṭṭār displays so well as he textualizes Rabī'a.<sup>29</sup> The complexity of gender constructions here is intricately associated with the broad gender cosmology of Sufi literature, the founding assumptions of the text and its intellectual vulnerabilities. The assumptions of the text are apparent in the 'operations of grammar' wherein spiritual excellence is only readable as a male trait, and masculinity is made a necessary preface for spiritual rank. In 'Aṭṭār's imaginary, women may be men, and bodies don't always align with normative genders. This metaphoric network makes possible the convergence of female bodies and masculine ways of being. The silence of the text, what remains unspoken, is however most significant for reading 'Aṭṭār here; it is that Rabī'a is one amongst many women who have been acclaimed for their spiritual excellence. This reveals the vulnerability of the text, namely that indeed Rabī'a is a woman and indeed she does achieve an undeniable level of spiritual excellence, normatively considered only a male prerogative. Despite 'Aṭṭār's subterfuges, Rabī'a is both female and spiritually excellent and so spiritual excellence here is female.

This complexity may be read as more than a simple dichotomy and contestation between polarized genders. Nuanced assessments of how gender and sex, male and female ways of being, and male and female bodies, in addition to other bodies and other ways of being which have not been included here, are constituted through discourse, may prove valuable in understanding classical gender arrangements in more complex ways, providing more insights into how contemplation of the Divine in the feminine may challenge male prerogatives to spiritual excellence and pejorative understandings of female spirituality.

## **Conclusion**

The application of feminist reading strategies reveals the intricate negotiations of feminine subjectivity and spiritual excellence. Irigaray's

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<sup>29</sup> Heidi Ford is more comfortable with this reading than with a more intricate reading of gender. See "Hierarchical Inversions, Divine Subversions: The Miracles of Rābī'a al-Aḍawīa", *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 15, no. 2 (1999): 5-24.

motive in uncovering what lies beneath articulations and silences, is not only to “jam the machinery” that produces an excessively univocal representation of the feminine, cast as deficiency or negativity, but also to recast the apparent univocality of a text into a multiplicity of voices that offers a varied narrative, revealing here the possibilities that endure in cosmological genders and naturalized sex difference. To delve into the philosophical imaginary, so that the unconscious assumptions that act as given and natural may be revealed as prejudicial assumptions, which cannot withstand scrutiny, is to make apparent the elisions and the vulnerabilities of the text.

The value in doing this first, is in that it challenges the idea that the history of representation of women is simple or uncontested. The narratives of femininity and masculinity that emerge in the complex negotiation of Rabīʿa’s textual presence records a negotiation encumbered by ideas of privation and privilege that continues today. Second, it firmly locates present day negotiations of feminine subjectivity as part of an historical and indigenous trajectory of negotiations. The accusation that contemporary critiques of women’s status in Islam are the result of foreign influence, and therefore not “authentic”, cannot hold true in light of ‘Aṭṭār’s subtle subversions. Finally, while ‘Aṭṭār illustrates a willingness to consider non-normative gendered ways of being, we are unfortunately seldom too far from the assumption that femininity is by default inferior to masculinity.

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