Sa'diyya Shaikh

In Search of al-Insān: Sufism, Islamic Law, and Gender

Submission to God is the ultimate point of Islamic law. Hence, Islamic jurisprudence is primarily about the search for God's law. A fundamental dimension of such an inquiry concerns understandings of the God–human relationship, conceptions of the nature of God, of human nature, and of the purpose of human existence. These constitute the foundational conceptions upon which Islam's juridico-ethical legacy is built. *Taṣawwuf* or Sufism has over the centuries both theorized and provided detailed methods for understanding and cultivating the self and community, so that they may properly surrender to God. The pivotal contribution of Sufism to these foundational conceptions and to jurisprudence (*fiqh*) was already convincingly made by none other than the great classical scholar Abu Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111).

In this paper, I argue that there is an organic and dialogical relationship between Sufism and Islamic law that remains relatively unexplored in terms of its potential to enhance a rethinking of gender ethics. Within this dialogical relationship, it is possible to critically engage the ontological assumptions that underpin dominant Islamic ethical notions and legal positions on gender. Some of the central tenets of Sufism, in particular, allow contemporary Muslims an invigorating and ontologically faithful means to interrogate a number of primary assumptions on the nature and purpose of men and women as reflect-

ed in the historical *fiqh*. As such, particular readings of Sufism provide a resource to develop alternative faith-based ways of approaching gender issues within Islamic law. These understandings of Sufism when combined with a feminist lens have much to offer in the way of developing a comprehensive framework for an egalitarian politics of gender. By drawing on some of the nuanced and detailed elaborations of Sufi ontology, a feminist critique of the Muslim legal canon (*fiqh*) grounds itself firmly within an Islamic ethical paradigm.

I am certainly not making claims that Sufis have a monolithic position on gender or that Sufism is an ahistorical panacea of all things beneficial for women. The same al-Ghazālī, a central Sufi thinker who was able to expose the limitations of a law not based on ethical praxis, simultaneously conceptualized an ethics of justice that is comfortable—even at times complicit—with male domination. Sufism in its historical development and its multiple contexts, like all other areas of Islamic thought, has been characterized by tensions between patriarchal inclinations and gender-egalitarian impulses.

While negative understandings of women have been evident in some strands of Sufi thought and practices from its inception, particularly its earlier ascetic variety, Sufism in other instances has provided gender-egalitarian spaces. Primary sources document cases of the diverse ways in which the early Sufi women pursued the path of piety.[1] On the one hand, recent research suggests that most early women who pursued varying degrees of asceticism and spiritual discipline were also in fact subject to the normative social constraints—they lived typical lives, married, and had children.[2] On the other hand, one simultaneously finds cases of independent female mystics whose lives appear to be relatively free from much of the androcentric gender role expectations otherwise evident in their broader socio-historical milieux.[3] Some of these Sufi women, like their male contemporaries, lived in-

---

1   Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, *Dhikr an-niswa al-muta'abbidāt aṣ-Ṣūfiyyāt (Early Sufi Women)*, ed., trans., and comm. Rkia E. Cornell (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999).
2   Laury Silvers makes this case convincingly in "Statistical Analysis, Comparison, and Close Readings: Getting at the Data on Early Pious and Sufi Women," 2005, paper delivered at the American Academy of Religion, Philadelphia, forthcoming as a chapter in *Simply Good Women: The Lives, Thought, Practices of Early Pious, Sufi Women*. Maria Massi Dakake demonstrates how early Sufi women often used the language and metaphor of domesticity in describing their relationships to the divine Beloved in ways that were distinctive from their male counterparts in "'Guest of the Inmost Heart': Conceptions of the Divine Beloved among Early Sufi Women," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 3, no. 1 (2007): 72–97.
3   See entries on Sufi women in al-Sulamī as well as Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī, *Rūh al-Quds and al-Durrat al-Fākhirah (Sufis of Andalusia)*, trans. R. Austin (Gloucestershire: Beshara Publication, 1988).

dependently, traveled on their own in search of knowledge, and had teachers and disciples of both sexes.[4] Perhaps in these instances, the diminished significance of gender identity on the path is related to the greater priority Sufism accords to the individual's inner state. In some cases, Sufi practices have subverted traditional patriarchal religious anthropology in ways that might provide contemporary Muslims with creative resources to expand the paradigm for gender justice in their societies.

I suggest that these egalitarian possibilities within Sufism are a product of radically different readings of human nature within certain narratives of Islam. Since jurisprudence is always premised on specific understandings of human nature and its "genderedness," these Sufi narratives have potentially profound implications for Islamic feminism and the law. In this paper, I envision how contemporary feminist approaches to the law might be enhanced by particular Sufi discourses. By discussing specific understandings of human nature reflected in Sufi psychology and narrated through Sufi stories, I critically examine how gender is defined in the Muslim imaginaire. The works of the extraordinary thinker and visionary Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), who was both Sufi and jurist, require closer scrutiny. His cosmology presents us with a vision of an ideal ethical self that explicitly engages gender and, I suggest, presents openings for reconceptualizing equality in ways that are both spiritually and socially relevant to contemporary Muslim societies. I argue that these Sufi constructs provide theoretical and methodological resources that are very helpful to contemporary Muslims committed to transforming the dominant gender paradigm characterizing the Islamic legal canon.

---

4   More generally, the debate around premodern Muslim women's participation in various facets of social life is complex and nuanced. The works of Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Saʿd to Who's Who* (Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers, 1994); Gavin Hambly, ed., *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage and Piety* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); and Amira Sonbol, *Women, the Family and Divorce Laws in the Islamic History* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996) all illustrate that women in varying periods and contexts of Muslim history were often engaged both directly and indirectly with the social sphere and in public discourses in ways that challenge commonplace assumptions about Muslim women's historical silence and invisibility. In reflecting on Ruth Roded's assessment that "female seclusion was an ideal that may have been more honored in the breach," Laury Silvers, however, argues that the relevant historical reports might suggest that realities of relative freedom and mobility did not apply to the average woman in average circumstances. Rather she argues that the women who enjoyed these freedoms were "either exceptional women or average women in exceptional circumstances" (in "Statistical Analysis, Comparison, and Close Readings," 11). Yet other studies show that lower-class women have historically enjoyed greater freedom and mobility than upper-class women. See Hambly, *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*.

Methodological Caveats

Clearly, traditional discourses have not applied the Islamic ethics of justice to gender issues in the revolutionary ways that Islamic feminists are currently doing. This sharpening of gender-egalitarian perspectives is in my view a natural and necessary development that both engages the tradition creatively while responding to the changing sensibilities on gender present within some twenty-first century Muslim communities.

While Ibn ʿArabī and Sufi discourse in general offer us some exciting possibilities to creatively and critically engage questions of gender ethics, neither the individual nor the discipline is monolithic. I fully recognize the polyphonous and contradictory currents of gender running through Sufi thought and practices. There are a number of hermeneutical and ideological complexities involved in a feminist reading of a tradition characterized by multiple and sometimes contrary economies of gender. In engaging a complex and ambivalent religious canon, I am genuinely inspired by the works of two feminist scholars: the Talmudic scholar Daniel Boyarin and the Buddhist scholar Rita Gross. My reflections in this section draw deeply on some of the nuanced and sophisticated methodological insights offered by these contemporary scholars who are each also deeply invested in their respective traditions.

My reading of Sufi texts is invariably informed by my particular historical and personal positioning which include my own interlocking commitments to Islam and feminism. It is by now a truism that all readers bring their assumptions, ideologies, and worldviews to their interpretations of texts as debates in the field of hermeneutics and cultural criticism have indicated. In this paper, I focus on a particular current of gender within traditional Sufi narratives that I find particularly compelling, and I foreground it as a potential trajectory that might be developed by contemporary Islamic feminists. In doing so, I am not denying that there are other ways of reading the tradition or that there are other contrary elements in the tradition. My approach represents one among a number of different contemporary readings of gender in the Sufi legacy, no more or less "authentic" than others; nonetheless, in the course of this paper, I illustrate how my particular reading of

gender draws on traditional Sufi resources in ways that are consistent with central concepts within Sufism.

Following Boyarin's refreshing lead, I frankly recognize that my selection of particular Sufi narratives reflects my own identifications and my desire to foreground, highlight, and amplify one set of compelling possibilities extant within the tradition. In tracing these feminist narratives, I am not claiming dominance or exclusivity for these possibilities, but merely pointing out that "this particular voice can be found in the texts and saying that I like it and wish to strengthen its presence and influence" in contemporary Muslim societies.[5]

My approach by no means suggests a blindness to the systematic history of male domination that has constantly rendered women the objects of male subjectivities in so much of the Islamic tradition, including Sufism. There is a vital need for a solid critique of this history; this has been done by many other scholars, and I have attempted that in other works (and do so to a more limited extent in this paper).[6] Here, however, I aim to explore a particular set of gendered understandings present within traditional Sufi discourses that I believe offer great value to contemporary Muslims, and to provide some reflections on what such Sufi resources might imply for an Islamic feminist trajectory.

A feminist reading of the past always raises the methodological specter of anachronism. The question arises as to whether it is really illuminating to discuss the past in terms of contemporary frames of reference, such as "patriarchy," "feminism," or "gender equality." In response to this legitimate question, I borrow some related theoretical insights culled by Rita Gross regarding a "usable" past.[7] Noting the partial and selective nature of all historical memory, Gross alerts us to the importance of uncovering marginalized liberatory gender models that can empower contemporary struggles for justice. This type of "usable" past, she notes, is important precisely because "a religious communi-

---

5   Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 25.

6   For contemporary critical readings of gender within the Islamic tradition, see Jamal Elias, "Female and the Feminine in Islamic Mysticism," *Muslim World* 78 (1988): 209–224; Rkia Cornell, "'Soul of a Woman was Created Below': Woman as the Lower Soul (*Nafs*) in Islam," in *World Religions and Evil: Religious and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Hendrik M. Vroom, 209–224 (New York: Rodopi Press, 2007); Saʻdiyya Shaikh, "Exegetical Violence: Nushuz in Quranic Gender Ideology," *Journal for Islamic Studies* 17, no. 1 (1997): 49–73; and Saʻdiyya Shaikh, "Knowledge, Women and Gender in the *Ḥadīth*," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 15, no. 1 (2004): 99–108.

7   Rita Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

ty constitutes itself by means of its collective memory, the past that it recalls and emulates."[8] A feminist politics of recovering marginalized histories is invaluable to those living religious communities who want to create new, expansive visions and future possibilities for their own humanity within their traditions. Moreover in doing feminist readings of the past, Gross notes,

> the assessment of history as androcentric in its thought-forms and patriarchal in its institutions is an *analysis*, an *accurate description*, not an accusation … We would be guilty of an inappropriate projection of feminist values onto the past only if we did not stop with an analysis of its thought-forms and institutions, but also railed against the humans who participated in those modes of thinking and living.[9]

These carefully nuanced modes of feminist critical scholarship as well as broader methodological insights offered by Gross and Boyarin inform some of the ways that I navigate a gendered exploration of Sufism and Ibn 'Arabī's ideas. My approach highlights voices of dissent to patriarchy extant in the plethora of Islamic tradition, and what possibilities these ruptures of the dominant gender ideology may hold for contemporary Muslim debates on Islamic law.[10] It is noteworthy for our purposes that while contemporary Muslims might articulate concerns with gender in the language of justice and human rights, gender norms were in fact always contested in varying ways within the Islamic tradition—sometimes even by male thinkers in the premodern period.

The rest of this essay is divided into four parts. I begin with an overview of contemporary feminist debates on Islamic law. Here I outline some of the limitations characterizing many right-based approaches, and suggest that an engagement with Sufism might enable more radical transformations. In the section entitled "Sufi Psychology and *Jihād al-nafs*" I look at ways in which Sufi narratives of the self and the spiritual path enable critical discourses on gender hierarchy. In the next part, "Ibn 'Arabī: Ontology and Human Purpose," I introduce Ibn 'Arabī's cosmology and religious anthropology. The section on "Divine Attrib-

---

8   Ibid., 20.
9   Ibid., 23.
10   Mohammad Fadel, in a finely honed analysis of premodern Sunni legal discourses expertly demonstrates the tensions and ruptures within dominant gender ideology among medieval jurists in relation to questions of female participation in the law. See "Two Women, One Man: Knowledge, Power and Gender in Medieval Sunni Legal Thought," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 3 (1997): 185–204.

utes and the Gendered Insān" explores some of his conceptual and personal approaches to gender relations. In the final part, "The Tawhīdic Whole: Spiritual and Social Integrity," I present some of Ibn ʿArabī's gendered legal positions and how his approach provides a model of engagement between ontology, law, and gender ethics.

Feminist Debates in Islamic Law

Many contemporary feminist scholars espouse a "rights" discourse in their critique of gender inequality in Islamic law. Some of these feminist reformers highlight that traditional *fiqh* discourse offers women more rights than the ones their societies confer on them, and selectively deploy the *fiqh* tradition to counter particular androcentric cultural norms.[11] Others argue that premodern interpretations of the law were characterized by a flexibility that often favored women, and that modernity disrupted this pattern.[12] Yet others prioritize traditional legal rulings that seem to benefit women pertaining to a husband's maintenance of his wife, and the provision of dowry at the time of marriage.[13] In short, proponents of rights discourse generally retrieve rights for women that have been marginalized within dominant interpretations of the Qur'an and sharīʿa. This effectively translates into a discourse of competing equalities: men and women are granted rights by traditional approaches to the sharīʿa, but men have generally been granted their rights and women have not always been allowed theirs. Hence, the goal is to resolve this disparity and to accord to women parallel, if not always equal, rights owed to them by established traditions of the law.

The right-based approaches of many feminist Muslim scholars are strategically and pragmatically necessary. However, scholars also urgently need to engage in a comprehensive structural critique that actively interrogates the foundational premises and nature of dominant *fiqh* structures. A pure rights discourse is limited by the fact that it often deals with the symptoms of inherited structures of patriarchal dis-

---

11   Asifa Quraishi, "Her Honour: An Islamic Critique of the Rape Laws of Pakistan from a Woman-Sensitive Perspective," in *Windows of Faith*, ed. G. Webb, 102–135 (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

12   Sonbol, *Women, the Family and Divorce Laws*.

13   See Azizah al-Hibri, "Introduction to Muslim Women's Rights," in *Windows of Faith*, ed. G. Webb, 51–71 (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

course without necessarily or rigorously interrogating the very nature, roots, and assumptions of the structures themselves.[14] Often a rights discourse inadvertently internalizes the hegemony of inherited structures. In developing a more structural critique, it is crucial to foreground the constructed nature of *fiqh* as a historically evolving interpretation of *sharī'a*—one that is intended to actualize particular ideals and visions of reality and that is not an end in itself.

A structural critique of the established *fiqh* canon would involve asking some fundamental questions relating to the nature of *sharī'a* and its historical interpretations. These include: What are the ideological implications of using the terms "sharī'a" and "*fiqh*" interchangeably? What is the continuing impact of context and historical circumstance on the formation of Islamic law? In particular, what are the notions of "human being," "society," and "God" that underlie dominant positions in the *fiqh* literature? Most significantly, it is imperative to look at the very nature and constitution of *fiqh* in relation to a deeper vision of ultimate reality and human purpose. Such a re-evaluation needs to ask how the inherited *fiqh* as a discourse manifests and enacts that reality, and if in fact it does so.

Particularly in relation to issues of gender, we must ask critical questions about the nature of human beings and gender differences assumed within the traditional *fiqh* discourse. Since the established legal canon implicitly operates on particular understandings of the nature of men and women and their relationships, it is necessary to interrogate the basis of such understandings. In doing so, it will become clear that many of the specific understandings of gender relationships assumed by dominating discourses in the *fiqh* canon reflect the contingent and contextual constructs of their premodern formulators. As such, these need to be re-examined and reformulated.[15]

Any such rethinking cannot develop exclusively on the basis of contemporary social sensibilities. It also has to be informed by metaphysical sensibilities that foreground the God–human relationship in its development of ethics. As I illustrate, Sufism by its very nature addresses

---

14   Kecia Ali lucidly makes this case in her analysis of contemporary "feminist—apologist" approaches to Islamic law. See "Progressive Muslims and Islamic Jurisprudence: The Necessity for Critical Engagement with Marriage and Divorce Law," in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. O. Safi, 163–189 (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003).

15   For the problematic nature of premodern legal formulations of gender, see Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics in Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Ḥadīth and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006).

reality and the nature of human beings, society, and God precisely at this foundational ontological level. In order to comprehensively analyze and critique social structures, it is imperative to focus on both the types of prevalent gendered practices and their underlying religious rationale. Asking the core perennial religious questions, namely "Who am I? Why am I here? How do I live correctly? How do I attribute value?" allows one to engage gender at a foundational level of religious meaning. Doing this afresh makes it possible to arrive at very different answers than the ones proposed by dominant paradigms.

Having said this, I differ from the approach of some contemporary scholars of Sufism who present spiritual equality between men and women as unrelated to social realities. Sachiko Murata exemplifies such an approach in *The Tao of Islam*, a pioneering and comprehensive work on gender in classical Islamic thought. While exquisitely illustrating a variety of complex gender mappings that characterize the Islamic tradition, Murata explicitly identifies an eternally gendered separation between the socio-legal arena on the one hand and the spiritual realm on the other, as central to the Islamic tradition. She objectively describes much of the established legal canon as characterized by hierarchy and strictly defined gender roles which, she adds significantly, are established by God.[16] Accordingly, freedom, liberty, and dynamic relational gender configurations are rather to be found in the realm of the spirit. Murata states, "In the Islamic perspective, the revealed law prevents society from degenerating into chaos. One gains liberty not by overthrowing hierarchy and constraints, but by finding liberty in its true abode, the spiritual realm."[17] While this view might accurately reflect some perspectives within the Islamic intellectual tradition, other alternatives are extant in the tradition—alternatives that suggest the realm of spirituality is intimately linked to issues of social and legal equality.

The debates on the relationship between sharīʿa and ṭarīqa have a long history in Islamic thought. In some Sufi groups, adepts with

---

16   Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 174.

17   Ibid., 79. Murata's deep commitment to this distinctive separation between the spiritual and the legal realms is also reflected in the ways that she engages Ibn ʿArabī's ideas. While she extensively discusses his cosmological views of gender that reverberate in every realm of existence, including intimate relationships between men and women, she excludes all references to his fairly radical legal discussions on gender that I outline later on in this paper.

advanced capacities for ethical judgment exercised their discretion in observing the law. Others insisted that religiously acceptable behavior should always be determined by the letter of the law; in fact, within the modern period contestations on the nature of what constitute proper Sufi teachings and practice resulted in an intensified focus by some major Sufi groups on asserting the primacy of the sharī'a in relation to Sufi practice.[18] Most of these discussions, however, by and large accept the dominant *fiqh* canon, with all of its gendered assumptions, as accurate expressions of sharī'a. I question such assumptions, particularly some of the problematic presuppositions on the nature of men and women that underlie much of the inherited and socially conditioned *fiqh* canon. While for most legal scholars it is a theoretical commonplace that the *fiqh* canon represents limited human attempts to express the sharī'a and that the former is the product of dynamic human processes, one often finds more ideologized and simplistic conflations between sharī'a and *fiqh* in popular discourse and among some religious leaders within Muslim communities. This continues to have detrimental consequences for gender justice and women's rights in many contemporary Muslim societies.

My paper also challenges dominant gender constructions underlying much of the traditional *fiqh* canon as deviating from the ontological assumptions intrinsic to the sharī'a. Hence, I am not engaging in the older debate regarding whether the sharī'a has primacy over the *ṭarīqa* or vice versa. Rather, I am arguing that certain Sufi discourses possibly present more faithful readings of the sharī'a and the related assumptions of human nature, as reflected in the Qur'an, than the dominant *fiqh* discourses. By exploring Sufi metaphysics, this paper suggests a different nexus between *taṣawwuf* and sharī'a offering an ontological ground for re-shaping gender ethics in emerging feminist *fiqh* discourses.

18   Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Sufis and Anti-Sufis: the Defence, Rethinking and Rejection of Sufism in the Modern World* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999). For contestations of notions like Sufi "reform" and neo-Sufism see R. S. O'Fahey and Bernd Radtke, "Neo-Sufism Reconsidered," *Der Islam* 70 NO. 1 (1993): 52–87, and F. de Jong and Bernd Radtke, *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

Sufi Psychology
and Jihād Al-Nafs

Since the goal of the Sufi path is to deepen the God–human relationship, meticulous attention is given to removing spiritual obstacles within the individual that may impede progress on the path. As such, the focus on purifying and disciplining the self has resulted in an elaborate and detailed inquiry into the mechanics of personality. The prioritization of the inner state that assumes the same spiritual imperatives for all human beings, irrespective of whether one occupies a male or female body, signifies one of the organically genderless assumptions within Sufism.[19] In principle, Sufism presupposes that every human being can pursue and achieve the same ultimate goals, and that gender does not constitute an impediment or an advantage to these ends. These assumptions potentially pose a direct challenge to the very basis of patriarchy where the male body is the signifier of social and ontological superiority. By exploring Sufi constructs of psychology and personality, we also discover the inherent wariness that this discourse promotes toward any person's assertion of superiority over another. Such suspicion toward the underpinnings of social power opens up spaces for a feminist critique of social hierarchies including gender discrimination. Exploring notions of personality and psychology within Sufism provides a necessary starting point in the exploration of its gender ideology.

The components and dynamics of personality in Sufism may be conceptualized in relation to the tripartite relationship between the soul (*nafs*), the heart (*qalb*), and the spirit (*rūḥ*) as identified in the Qur'an.[20] The *nafs*, which can be identified as the soul or one's self-awareness, is a dynamic entity determined by the spiritual state of the individual.[21] It can range from being dominated by base instincts to being characterized by a state of peace and submission to God, with varying intermediate possibilities. Its most unrefined state is what the Qur'an calls *al-nafs al-ammāra bi-lsū'*, the commanding soul or "the

---

19   Cornell, "'Soul of a Woman was Created Below,'" demonstrates how some male Sufis have ignored these basic genderless assumptions and integrated misogynist views of the self into their works.

20   Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 191.

21   William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 17.

soul that incites to evil" (Q 12:53). In this sense, it is defined by self-centered, egoistic, and compulsive tendencies. Drawing a person to the realm of selfhood and transient desires, the *nafs al-ammāra b-il-sū'* is responsible for the separation and dispersion from the original unitive state between God and humanity. In its blindness to the true nature of reality, the *al-nafs al-ammāra* perceives worldly attractions such as power, fame, wealth, or physical gratification as meaningful in themselves. Thus it has an inordinate love for the ephemeral attractions of the world.

On the Sufi path, the greater jihād against the inclinations of the *nafs al-ammāra* is reflected in the statement of the early Sufi woman Umm Ṭalq, who said "The *nafs* is king if you indulge it, but is a slave if you torment it."[22] The well-known Sufi, Ḥujwīri, compares the *nafs* to an animal such as a wild horse or dog that needs to be trained or even enslaved in order to change its nature and teach its place on the spiritual path.[23] Subduing the instinctual elements of self is seen as essential to spiritual purification, which in turn facilitates a deeper knowledge of God. Another early Sufi, Umm 'Alī, reflects this insight in the view that "[o]ne who is confirmed in the knowledge of true servitude will soon attain the knowledge of lordship."[24] Thus, the first step in spiritual practice relates to the subjugation of the commanding self. Only after this first step is it possible to attain knowledge of lordship, that is, the realization of the complete divine imperative of vicegerency that exists latently within all humanity.

The entity that represents the opposite of the "lower soul" is the spirit (*rūḥ*) which is a subtle, life-giving entity blown into every human being from God's self (Q 15:29). While the lower soul is associated with the self-centeredness and blindness of the devil, the *rūḥ* has been associated with the angelic qualities of luminosity and discernment.[25] The Qur'an states that "the spirit is of the command of my Lord and you (humanity) have been granted but a little knowledge of it" (Q 17:85). Suffice to say that the *rūḥ* is that which pulls one toward God and the higher echelons of spiritual awareness. The opposing spiritual forces activated by the respective inclinations of the *nafs al-ammāra* and the

---

22   Al-Sulamī, *Dhikr an-niswa al-muta'abbidāt aṣ-Ṣūfiyyāt*, 118.
23   'Alī bin Uthmān al-Ḥujwīrī, *Kashf al-Maḥjūb (Revelation of the Mystery)*, trans. R. Nicholson (New York: Pir Press, 1999), 202.
24   al-Sulamī, *Dhikr an-niswa al-muta'abbidāt aṣ-Ṣūfiyyāt*, 244.
25   Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 7.

rūḥ struggle for supremacy within the individual's heart (*qalb*) and give rise to various thoughts, ideas, and impulses known as *khawāṭir*. Moral choice for the early adepts depended on a careful analysis and discernment of these forces, the resultant *khawāṭir*, and the response of aspirants to these.[26]

The third constituent, the *qalb*, is the center of human spiritual receptivity in the Sufi schema and is not to be confused either with the physical heart or with emotions. The level of receptivity of the heart is contingent on the spiritual state of the individual. Through succumbing to evil *khawāṭir* and the torpor of earthly desires, most hearts become rusted or opaque.

This rust, or veil on the heart, can only be removed by persistent remembrance and invocation of God, abstinence from incorrect behavior, performance of good actions, including service to other human beings, and other rigorous spiritual practices.[27] As the aspirant pursues such spiritual disciplines, the commanding soul is weakened and instead transforms into the *nafs al-lawwāma*, "the blaming soul" (Q 75:2). This marks the emergence of the conscience, where the striving for good has been integrated and internalized. Thus the soul, aware of its own imperfections, reprimands the person if he or she inclines toward anything that constitutes spiritual negligence.

With consistent striving and purification, the heart is cleansed and illuminated by the divine light, and the soul of the seeker is satisfied. It is then that the *al-nafs al-muṭma'inna*, "the soul at peace" (Q 89:27), dominates the individual. This state is described in the *hadīth qudsī* where God states, "The heavens and earth contain me not, but the heart of my faithful servant contains me." In order for the mystic to fully realize the presence of God in the heart, it is necessary to entirely subdue and surrender those individualistic instincts that battle to remain sovereign. For Sufis, it is through the complete submission of the self to the Creator, through a pervasive state of *"islām"* (submission), that real human potentiality can be attained. The inherent critique of egotism within Sufi psychology presents an opportunity for challenging notions of male superiority. Here, the commitment to a constant

---

26   Al-Muḥāsibī (d. 857) developed a complex moral psychology that provided the seeker with ways to understand egoism and vigilantly monitor one's responses. For selections from his writings, see Michael Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 171–195.

27   For a discussion on early Sufi practices, see Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*.

awareness of God's absolute sovereignty counters the human instinct to claim power, including male claims to authority over women.

Within this framework, any such claim demands interrogation and may be suspected as a potential trap of the lower self (*al-nafs al-ammāra*). We find this reflected in a number of classical Sufi narratives where interactions between women and men effectively constitute a penetrating spiritual and social critique of their normative gender assumptions.

An anecdote reported by Ibn Taymiyya concerning a Sufi woman, Umm Zaynub Fāṭima bint Abbas al-Baghdadiyya (d. 1314), is illustrative. Umm Zaynub Fāṭima was not only the spiritual leader (*shaykha*) of the Ribat al-Baghdadiyya, but renowned among the religious divines of Cairo as a jurist (*faqīha*) and one who provided practical legal responses to people's questions (*muftiyya*). Having studied with him, Ibn Taymiyya had on occasion praised Shaykha Fāṭima in public circles, not only for her intelligence and knowledge but also for her personal qualities of enthusiasm and excellence. She is also known to have delivered public sermons in the mosque and it was in relation to her role of leadership that Ibn Taymiyya reports his unease:[28]

> It unsettled me that she mounted the pulpit to deliver sermons and I wished to forbid her until one night I beheld the Prophet Muhammad in a dream and he rebuked me saying "This pious woman performs good works."[29]

Another story of a powerful ninth century Sufi woman, Fāṭima of Nishapur, also illustrates a similar gender motif. Apparently Dhū an-Nūn al-Miṣrī had, in his early acquaintance with Fāṭima, rejected a present from her on account of her being a woman. She responded by saying that the true Sufi is one who does not focus on the secondary cause—in this case a woman—but rather on the Original Cause and the Eternal Giver.[30] Instead of disputing with him about the relative merits of women and men, she incisively transcends superficial ego-based discussions invoking questions of ultimate reality onto the horizon.

---

28 Irfana Hashmi's excellent paper, "The Women of the Medieval Minbar," 2006, paper delivered at the American Academy of Religion, Washington, DC, analyzes the complex roles and social relationships in the lives of women religious leaders including Fāṭima in premodern Islam.

29 Khalīl ibn Aybak al-Ṣafadī, *A'yān al-'aṣr wa-a'wān al-naṣr* (Beirut: Dār al-fikr al-mu'āṣir, 1998), 4:28.

30 Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 426.

Yet another narrative involves the legendary Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya (d. 801). She was possibly among the first Sufis to advocate the doctrine of pure, disinterested love of God for God's own sake, unattached and disinterested in its outcome—combining this with a doctrine of *kashf* or unveiling of the divine Beloved.[31] Rābiʿa was apparently visited by a group of religious men who tried to goad her into responding inappropriately. They declared to her, "All the virtues have been scattered on the heads of men. The crown of prophethood has been placed on men's heads. The belt of nobility has been fastened around men's waists. No woman has ever been a prophet." To this Rābiʿa calmly replied, "All that is true, but egoism and self-worship and 'I am your Lord' have never sprung from a woman's breast … All these things have been the specialty of men."[32] Here she astutely points out how the *al-nafs al-ammāra* has conquered men through their chauvinism and male ego, thus blinding them to the real nature of power and truth. More especially, Rābiʿa articulated the quintessential Sufi principle that the ultimate concerns are the state of one's soul, and one's correct orientation to God. Everything that detracts from this orientation, such as social power, gender differences, or prestige, may be spiritually detrimental to the individual.

These narratives present us with woman savants who have truly internalized the essential dimensions of Islam, which are singularly concerned with purifying the God–human relationship through diminishing the *al-nafs al-ammāra* so that eventually the heart can reflect the realities of the divine. In these stories, the men are depicted as conceited and chauvinistic, creating gender hierarchies that veil them from perceiving the true nature of Reality. Men's assumptions of superiority are depicted as reflections of their spiritual inadequacies and are confronted as such. The women in these stories appear to be free from the delusions of self-importance and thus have attained more profound insights into the real power that animates all beings. Significantly, in these tales, women articulate central Sufi principles that simultaneously constitute for our purposes, compelling challenges to the very basis of gender discrimination.

---

31 Ahmet Karamustapha, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 4.
32 Rābiʿa's reproach echoes the Qurʾanic condemnation of Pharoah's statement, "I am your lord" (Q 79:24). See Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār, *Tadhkhirat al-Awliyā (Muslim Saints and Mystics)*, trans. A. J. Arberry (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 48.

281

Elsewhere, however, misogyny is reflected in Sufi literature where, for example, womankind is associated with the destructive attractions of the commanding soul.[33] Some Sufi men linked the dangers of an overwhelming sexual drive to women, relegating both to the realm of the *al-nafs al-ammāra*. However, their wariness toward women clearly represented an outward projection of the inner struggles that these men were having with their own desires and desiring selves. As such, these reflect the partiality and limitations of a particular type of male subjectivity. Nonetheless, the above narratives on Rābi'a and Fāṭima illustrate that core assumptions within Sufism itself may provide resources to challenge patriarchy insomuch as patriarchy reflects humanity's baser inclinations of the *al-nafs al-ammāra*. If interpreted in this manner, progress on the spiritual path can imply directly challenging patriarchal impulses as they arise.

Yet other Sufi narratives reflect unconventional relationships between men and women in contexts that appear to be otherwise fairly restrictive. They often describe egalitarian and intense relationships based on spiritual vocation between unrelated Sufi men and women. Sufi literature also recognizes women as accomplished spiritual savants who were teachers to men and women alike in stories that are rather evocative and suggestive.

The first narrative—one of the most well known—reflects the superior spiritual attainment of a woman Sufi vis-a-vis her male counterpart. One day Ḥasan saw Rābi'a near a lake and wanting to impress her, he threw his prayer rug on the surface of the water calling to her to join him in prayer.[34] She responded by saying, "Ḥasan, when you are showing off your spiritual goods in the worldly market, it should be things that your fellow-people are incapable of displaying," and she threw her prayer mat into the air, and flying up to it she asked Ḥasan to join her. Since Ḥasan's spiritual powers did not extend to this station, he was silenced. Rābi'a used this as a teaching moment, saying, "Ḥasan, what you did, fish also do, and what I did, flies also do. The real work transcends both these tricks, one must apply oneself to the real work."[35]

This anecdote ironically illustrates that Rābi'a's "spiritual goods" are in fact of a superior nature and capacity to that of Ḥasan, one of

---

33   Schimmel, "Eros in Sufi Literature and Life," 124.
34   While it is unlikely that Ḥasan and Rābi'a ever met since their historical dates do not coincide, the endurance of these narratives is significant in providing some indication of the gender imaginaire present in Sufism.

the foremost male Sufis of the time. However, far more significant spiritually is that Rābiʿā unmasks the fruitless nature of spiritual conceit and sensationalist miracles. She teaches that spiritual progress is about stripping the self of delusions of superiority; that ego-based desire for social recognition can insidiously penetrate spiritual pursuits; and that the focus on God is never to be compromised by such inclinations. The story by clearly depicting Rābiʿa's greater wisdom over Ḥasan illustrates that spiritual attainment is not determined by gender. In such narratives about interactions between Sufi women and men, men exhibit the baser spiritual vices of arrogance, vanity, and self-importance, and women emerge as witty, wise, and spiritually advanced, displaying superior insights into mystical realities.

Another account, relating to Umm ʿAlī Fāṭima (d. 849), reflects unconventional gender power relations characterizing the life of this accomplished Sufi woman. She consulted with some of the most prominent mystics of the time, including Abu Nafs al-Nīsāburī and Bāyazīd al-Bisṭamī. Fāṭima is reported to have initiated a marriage proposal to her future husband, the Sufi aspirant Aḥmad Khaḍrawayh and pursued him when he did not immediately accept her offer.[36] On an occasion when Fāṭima lifted her veil in the presence of Bāyazīd, with whom she conducted extensive spiritual discourses, her husband expressed some consternation and jealousy. She consoled him with the following comment:

> You are intimate with my physical self. Abu Yazīd is intimate with my spiritual way. You rouse my passion. He brings me to God. The proof of this is that he can dispense with my company, whereas you need me.[37]

Given that her husband too was a spiritual aspirant, one of course wonders how reconciliatory such a comment actually was. However, her sincerity is evident in a subsequent event reported by Ḥujwīri: Fāṭima continued to treat Bāyazīd with the same boldness until the day that he commented on her henna-stained hands. At this point, she summarily terminates their relationship saying, "Oh Bāyazīd, so long as you did not see my hand and henna, I was at ease with you, but now that your eye has fallen on me our companionship is unlawful."[38]

---

35 ʿAṭṭār, *Tadhkhirat al-Awliyā*, 45.
36 Ibid., 173–174.
37 Ibid.

Fāṭima's comment is revealing and compelling: Sufi friendships between men and women had to navigate the complex and at times contradictory and fraught realm of materiality and sexuality. When Fāṭima perceived a shift in awareness in Bāyazīd—a preoccupation with the realm of the body—she unceremoniously reinstated socially appropriate boundaries.

Other stories concerning Umm ʿAlī Fāṭima and her husband, Aḥmad, suggest that they were fellow travelers on the mystical path and that her husband acquiesced to her in decisions on various matters.[39] The narratives surrounding Fāṭima present us not only with a self-assured and spiritually developed individual, but with a woman who single-mindedly determines the contours and parameters of her interactions with men, be it her husband or a fellow spiritual aspirant.

Another Sufi woman, Fāṭima of Nishapur, mentioned previously, was the teacher and peer of some of the most prominent mystics of the time including Bāyazīd and Dhū an-Nūn al-Miṣrī. They fully recognized her spiritual mastery: when Dhū an-Nūn was asked by an older male Sufi who was the most excellent person he knew, he responded that it was Fāṭima, adding, "She is a saint from among the friends of God, the Glorious and Mighty. She is also my teacher (ustādhī)."[40] Bāyazīd al-Bisṭamī is reported to have said of her, "In all my life I have only seen one true man and one true woman. The woman was Fāṭima of Nishapur. There was no station about which I had told her that she had not already undergone."[41] Fāṭima was not only a spiritual teacher to male Sufis but was also described by her male disciples as the most excellent among *all* Sufis, reflecting counter-normative gender positions within mainstream Sufi discourse. Bāyazīd, describing Fāṭima's spiritual status said, "If any man desires to see a true man hidden in women's clothes let him look at Fāṭima."[42] This ideologically loaded manner of describing spiritually accomplished women as male is not uncommon in Sufism. We noted Dhū al-Nūn's earlier description of Fāṭima as his teacher using the masculine form of the word (ustādh).

Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār (d. 1221), à Sufi poet and biographer, in describing Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya, states that God does not look at the out-

38   Al-Ḥujwīrī, *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 119.
39   ʿAṭṭār, *Tadhkhirat al-Awliyā*, 174–175.
40   al-Sulamī, *Dhikr an-niswa al-mutaʿabbidāt aṣ-Ṣūfiyyāt*, 144.
41   Javed Nurbaksh, *Sufi Women* (New York: Khaniqahi-Nimatullahi Publications, 1990), 162.
42   ʿAṭṭār, *Tadhkhirat al-Awliyā*, 174–175.

ward form or gender but at the intention of the heart and that "when a woman becomes a man in the path of God, she is a man and one can no longer call her a woman."[43] He adds that the first *man* to enter paradise will be Mary, the mother of Jesus. Thus some Sufis have used this type of gender discourse where spiritually advanced women are described as either being quintessentially "male," that is, a man sent in a female form, or women who have, through their unusual progress, attained the status of "male."

Rkia Cornell[44] suggests that masculine descriptions of Sufi women signified that they were considered as equal to the male Sufi masters of the time, a linguistic device that also characterized other areas of Islamic learning. In this androcentric symbolic system, social constructions of maleness with its attendant associations of agency and excellence have been mapped onto a religious phenomenon. Here the sign "male" is not restricted to men but rather signifies spiritual aspirants, including women. Such views on accomplished women are double-edged. On the one hand, this religious classification undermines some of the social realities that circumscribed women. By these shifting significations of gendered language, male Sufis theoretically incorporated the full spiritual agency of women in contexts otherwise characterized by masculinist assumptions. On the other hand, this language reflects the pervasiveness of patriarchal ideology where spiritual mastery is fundamentally connected to men. As such, iconoclastic women can only be understood if they are somehow seen to abandon their womanhood and take on male personae. The metaphor of "becoming male" used for spiritually enlightened women is premised on an anthropology that cannot assimilate the category of femaleness into its ideal of human perfection. In these instances, "maleness" as an ontological category is still the *de facto* norm and point of departure for spiritual perfection. This type of language can be seen to re-inscribe male normativity.

For our purposes, it is necessary to acknowledge the pragmatic, historical, and contextual nature of such Sufi language. It reflects the gendered symbolic world of a premodern Sufi milieu that comprises varying and ambivalent notions of gender. Furthermore, the repeated use of such gender categorizations that speak about spiritual perfection,

---

43 Ibid., 40.
44 Cornell, "'Soul of a Woman was Created Below,'" 59–60.

even if only symbolically, as a "masculine" or "male" reality, is ideologically problematic. It implies an insidious othering and marginalization of women and their realities. These Sufis within their particular contexts use accepted, dominant, androcentric language to express unacceptable, marginalized, gender-egalitarian realities of women's full access to perfection. Their symbolism creates critical openings to transform dominant patriarchal conceptions of gender within the Muslim legacy. In fact, al-Bisṭāmī's recognition that Fāṭima, the "one true woman," had full access to all spiritual stations presents a linguistic counternarrative to masculinist Sufi language on gender. The Sufi narratives discussed are not dense theoretical treatises on gender. Nevertheless, they constitute clear, sophisticated articulations of Sufi principles in ways that interrogate gender constructs at a foundational level. They assertively challenge gender-biased formulations on the nature of self and submission in Islam.

Ibn 'Arabī:
Ontology and Human Purpose

Next, I will focus on the teachings of Ibn 'Arabī, a pivotal figure in Sufi thought whose ideas elicited varied responses and who occupies an ambivalent status in the history of Muslim orthodoxy.[45] In many of his teachings, Ibn 'Arabī asserts women's equality with men in both ontological and social terms in ways that are illuminating for contemporary Muslim gender debates. Amidst the rich panoply of his mystical insights, one discovers some very radical conceptions of gender, atypical among thirteenth-century male scholarly elite. Nonetheless, it is important to remain aware that these "egalitarian" narratives were at times interwoven seamlessly with hierarchical and patriarchal elements more typical within his context. Ibn 'Arabī's Sufi works, like so much in the Islamic legacy, reflect the tension between patriarchal formulations and gender-egalitarian impulses. While some contemporary Ibn 'Arabī scholars focus on elements of his work that point to essential gender differences and a paternalistic vision of gender comple-

---

[45] For a fascinating history of the contestations of Ibn 'Arabī's legacy amongst premodern Muslim scholars, see Alexander Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999).

mentarity, his more radically egalitarian positions on gender and the nature of human perfection have not received sufficient attention.[46] Nonetheless, even while recognizing the ambivalent gender voices in Ibn ʿArabī's legacy, it is my concerted view that he remains at the deepest level one of the early dissidents to patriarchy, a view that I substantiate in the rest of this paper.

When situating Ibn ʿArabī's ideas within his personal and historical context, there are a number of significant considerations. In perusing the biographical material on Ibn ʿArabī's life from a gender lens, one aspect stands out quite starkly: there is a distinct and large presence of women in his life, not only in terms of his family but also in his religious and social circles. Ibn ʿArabī had close relationships with two of his female teachers, to whom he refers with great love and reverence; he also appears to interact with a number of his female Sufi contemporaries, one of whom he even accompanied on a journey from Mecca to Jerusalem;[47] he mentions a significant number of his female disciples whom he nurtures and mentors carefully on the Sufi path;[48] and finally, there is his intense and enigmatic relationship to the beautiful Niẓām who is the inspiration for some of his most spiritually exalted love poetry expressed in his work entitled *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*.[49]

The extent of Ibn ʿArabī's interactions with unrelated women is particularly noteworthy in light of recent scholarship on premodern Andalusian social norms. On the one hand, we certainly find interesting indications that there were perhaps a few other Andalusian think-

---

46   See for example, Seyyid Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London: KPI, 1987) and Zailan Morris, "The Sufi Perspective on the Feminine State," *Islamic Quarterly* 36 no. 1 (1992): 46–57. Nasr's approach in this article reflects most starkly a broader trend of interpreting Ibn ʿArabī's gender writings in ways that reinforce gender hierarchy with a romanticized version of patriarchal complementarity as does Zailan Morris who draws heavily on Nasr's work. While Murata, *The Tao of Islam* provides a far more sophisticated and nuanced reading of Ibn ʿArabī and Sufi discourse, her approach remains characterized by a view of gender complementarity that effectively echoes many patriarchal stereotypes. All these interpreters of Ibn ʿArabī are in fact adherents of the "traditionalist school" and a Perennialist worldview, which are characterized by a strident critique of modernity and a concomitant idealization of the past in ways that have profound implications for gender relations. Their readings of Ibn ʿArabī translate into fairly conservative and traditional ideas on gender roles. A similar type of conservative and traditional approach is also evident in the nonetheless compelling writings of Abdul Hakim Murad, "Islam, Irigaray, and the Retrieval of Gender," 1999, http://www.iol.ie/~afifi/Articles/gender.htm. In *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), I focus on the tension between egalitarianism and patriarchy in Ibn ʿArabī's works. While recognizing the boundaries of Ibn ʿArabī's historical sensibilities, in the manuscript I also demonstrate how he uses mystical paradoxes to "unsay" many of his seemingly patriarchal positions on gender.

47   See Ibn ʿArabī, *Rūḥ al-Quds and al-Durrat al-Fākhira*, 155.

48   See Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī, *Dīwān Ibn ʿArabī* (Būlūq, 1855), 54–57.

49   Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī, *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq. A Collection of Mystical Odes of Muhyidīn Ibn al-ʿArabī*, trans. R. Nicholson (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1911b).

ers who also appear to be sensitive to issues of gender in their works: for example, Ibn Ḥazm in a juristic work titled *al-Muḥallā bi-l-Āthār* argues in a number of cases in favor of women's participation in public rituals. This included allowing women to pray at the mosques, for women to be allowed to perform *i'tikāf*, a form of devotion that involves seclusion in the mosque for prayer or fasting, and for women to be allowed to participate in funeral processions and visit cemeteries.[50] However, one cannot read these legal positions as necessarily reflective of properly egalitarian social spaces. Historian Maria Luis Avila suggests that despite some scholarly assertions about the freedom enjoyed by Andalusi women, such freedom is not reflected in the biographical dictionaries between the ninth and eleventh centuries.[51] By analyzing data on women in those dictionaries, Avila makes the following assertions: there were relatively few women involved in the acquisition of scientific and religious knowledge in al-Andalus. Most women were active in the sphere of the family exclusively, and when in the few exceptional instances women were active outside of this sphere, social norms dictated that they stayed away from men as far as possible.[52] If Avila is correct about these gender norms, then Ibn 'Arabī's intense relationships with numerous non-kin women as well as the very powerful and socially visible Sufi women he describes become even more meaningful.

An incident in Ibn 'Arabī's life adds support to Avila's contention regarding fairly conservative gender constructions in premodern Andalusia. Ibn 'Arabī was compelled to produce a judicious commentary on his *Tarjumān* explaining how all his references to love in this poem alluded to the spiritual realm. This commentary was in fact a response to accusations that his *Tarjumān* was scandalously erotic and sensual. Such an outcry from the religious establishment suggests a context where representations of women and sensuality in relation to a discourse of spirituality were considered controversial and cause for censure. Unlike Ibn 'Arabī, it appears that some of his contemporaries found it difficult to see the relationship between female embodiment, sensuality, and spiritual truth.

50 Camilla Adang, "Women's Access to Public Space according to al-Muḥallā bi-l-Āthār," in *Writing the Feminine: Women in Arab Sources*, eds. M. Marin and R. Deguilhem, 75–94 (London: I.B. Taurus, 2002).
51 Maria Luis Avila, "Women in Andalusi Biographical Sources," in *Writing the Feminine: Women in Arab Sources*, eds. M. Marin and R. Deguilhem (London: I. B. Taurus, 2002), 151.
52 Ibid., 159.

Intriguingly Ibn ʿArabī informs us that when he first embarked on the spiritual path, he intensely disliked women and sex. His instinctual aversion to women caused him great consternation, since it was contrary to a prophetic tradition that states that God made women lovable to the Prophet Muhammad. Ibn ʿArabī deeply feared incurring the wrath of God for despising what the Prophet loved and thus beseeched God to intervene with his paltry state. As a result Ibn ʿArabī found that his condition of aversion was dissipated and he informs us exuberantly that "God made them [women] lovable to me and I am the greatest of all creation in compassion towards them and in guarding their rights because in this matter I am acting on insight (baṣīra) and it is from them [women] being made lovable to me [by God] and not from love that proceeds from my own nature."[53] While a cynic might simply interpret this comment as a retrospective defense against the controversy stirred by Ibn ʿArabī's *Tarjumān*, this comment is replete with meaning.

Ibn ʿArabī informs us that his gender lenses are in fact directly informed by mystical insights and a desire to emulate the prophetic example. Significant in this comment is Ibn ʿArabī's claim that love, compassion, and justice toward women are divine mandates upon men, based on prophetic example. They are not to be seen simply as the product of individual disposition or natural propensities in some men. Despite what might sound in a modern context as a condescending and paternalistic attitude toward women, Ibn ʿArabī in a dominantly patriarchal context is making a sweeping assertion. Claiming religious authority on the basis of both inspiration and prophetic example, he demands that the men in societies characterized by gender asymmetry are obliged to relate to women with love and benevolence. This comment by Ibn ʿArabī also highlights another significant point for feminist readers: within privileged classes in Islamic intellectual history, one also finds men who have resisted and contested patriarchy in some or other manner.

While accepting Ibn ʿArabī's claim about his changed state toward women in his own terms, his larger biography suggests a more complex relationship between his views on gender and different dimensions of his experience, both mystical and mundane. In my view, Ibn

---

53   Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (1911a), 4:84.

'Arabī's involvement with and exposure to female spiritual authorities in his formative period, and his later relationships with women like Niẓām and his female disciples, certainly influenced his ability to relate to women as fully fledged aspirants on the Sufi path. In my estimation, his egalitarian views on gender were not only informed by mystical insights but also his lived experiences. Having provided some biographical and historical context for Ibn 'Arabī's ideas, I now explore his worldview and understandings of human nature.

Discussions about the nature and purpose of human beings constitute central dimensions of Ibn 'Arabī's complex cosmology. In explaining the ontological basis of human nature, he draws on the hadith that "God created Adam in His own form," and on the Qur'anic verse that God taught Adam "all of the names" (Q 2:30). Here, the "names" refer to the attributes (ṣifāt) or qualities of God, what the Qur'an also describes as the beautiful names (al-asmā' al-ḥusnā). Traditionally, it is held that God has ninety-nine names, qualities, or attributes that reside within His state of unity (tawḥīd) and creation occurs through a manifestation of these attributes from the original state of oneness.

Ibn 'Arabī states that among all creation, humanity uniquely reflects the potential to comprehensively manifest the totality of God's attributes (al-kawn al-jāmi'). This comprehensive capacity is what defines the human being as a microcosm of the divine names.[54] Humanity unifies and concentrates all God's attributes that are reflected in a more differentiated manner in the rest of the universe or the macrocosm. With the human being, the universe becomes "ensouled" and transformed into the polished mirror of the divine attributes. The human creature is the ultimate link in the great chain of being which brings all previous links of the entire cosmos into manifest existence.[55]

Here, Ibn 'Arabī speaks of humanity in its archetypal capacity, what he calls the al-Insān al-Kāmil (The Perfect Human) who integrates all forms of the divine names.[56] This term, therefore, does not signify all actual individuals but rather the ideal or the potential that *all* humans do in fact possess, which is realized in some beings and not others. As such, it represents the ideal ethical self and the exemplary standard for

---

54 Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam (The Bezels of Wisdom)*, trans. R. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 50.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, 1:216.

human beings to strive toward. Those who realize and embody this archetype in their historical actualities are the prophets and the friends of God (*awliyā'*), as Sufi adepts are called.

Ibn 'Arabī provides an extensive discussion of the nature of the divine attributes (*ṣifāt*) as the ontological link between the unknowable essence of God (*al-Dhāt*) and creation—and humanity in particular. There are complex inter-relationships between the divine names and humanity, both perfect humans and the vast majority who are less than perfect. For all of creation, the divine names or attributes are not fixed entities, but relationships that link the Creator with the created. "The divine names," notes Ibn 'Arabī, "are the mediators or isthmus (*barzakh*) between us and the One named."[57] Invoking the trope of prosopopoeia and personification, he explains that the Divine Names behold the Divine: "They [the names] look to Him in as much as they name Him." When the Divine Names gaze upon humans, they perform a different function. At that moment, the names unload the effects of the divine predicates on the human subject and thus " ... they make the One named known and they make us known."[58]

In this cosmology, human beings all embody the divine names—this forms the basis of their existential identity and self-knowledge. God and humanity paradoxically constitute a mirror to one another. However, human beings cannot lay claim to these names autonomously, but always only in relation to God. In this regard, Ibn 'Arabī points out that:

> This locus of witnessing demonstrates that the root of every name held by created existence belongs in reality to the Real. When applied to the creatures, the name is a word without meaning, even though the creatures assume its traits.[59]

Human beings are thus rooted in God through the divine names. Applying this understanding to the spiritual path suggests that a person strives to purify the self from all false deities and to realize one's state of ontological dependency on God. Given this model, the question about process becomes all-important in the human spiritual journey. How does one proceed along this primordial trajectory of return to our true source and nature? What is the method for embodying the divine

---

57 Ibid., 2:203.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 2:350.

names that will take one from the periphery to the center? It is here that one requires some clarity about the nature and qualities of the names, their inter-relationships, and how humanity is to engage them.

In this framework, the ideal state of the *al-Insān al-Kāmil* is a theomorphic microcosm that embodies a harmonization of all the divine qualities. However, in reality, people can embody endless variations of the divine names, accounting for the full range of human possibilities in existence from actions that are noble to those that are blameworthy.[60] At various points in one's life, these names manifest themselves in different configurations with shifting intensities and complex inter-relationships. Ibn 'Arabī reiterates that the critical enterprise of progress on the path of self-realization demands that the aspirant observes the precise limit of each attribute and does not step outside the related balance among the different names.[61]

For many Muslim thinkers, including Ibn 'Arabī, the divine names can be divided into two groups that set up several sets of corresponding relationships with one another and allow the seeker to focus on the appropriate balance. These are broadly categorized into names of majesty (*jalāl*) and those of beauty (*jamāl*). Moreover, names of beauty, like the Loving, the Merciful, the Beneficent, the Gentle, the Forgiver, are closely connected to the concept of God's similarity with creation, while those of majesty, like the Inaccessible, the Bringer of Death, the Overwhelming, the All-High, the Great, are connected to God's incomparability with creation.

Since the ideal of the *al-Insān al-Kāmil* is comprehensive in reflecting the divine names, the notions of incomparability and similarity are primarily aimed at providing an epistemological guide to the seeker. The notion that many of the majestic (*jalāli*) qualities belong to the realm of incomparability implies that epistemologically the sojourner should not make any claims to these qualities at the outset. In relation to God's *jalāli* qualities, human beings should adopt a relationship of receptivity and dependency. One cannot respond to God's *jalāli* names with one's own ego-based *jalāli* qualities since this will only further distance one from the source and result in misguidance. Iblīs (Satan) epitomizes this misplaced *jalāl* when he counters God's command to prostrate before Adam with the claim that "I am better than he." His

---

60   See also Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 286–288.
61   Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, 4:3.

arrogance was born out of a misplaced sense of power and majesty resulting in a lack of receptivity to God's command and thus a refusal to submit to the Real. Blindness to the reality of his state of ontological dependency, a consequence of unaligned *jalāli* qualities, plunged Iblīs into a state of distance and expulsion from the realm of intimacy with God.

Similarly, for human beings, there is grave spiritual danger in assuming *jalāli* qualities, since this can very easily lead to a heedlessness of the real situation *vis-a-vis* God, and that ultimately spells failure and destruction for the seeker. It is only through receptivity and submission to God's *jalāl* that the servant can progress along the path of spiritual refinement. In this process, the seeker will experience increasing states of nearness to God and the reality of God's beauty (*jamāl*). Ibn ʿArabī suggests that love and submission are the ingredients that provide the possibilities for assumption of the divine attributes in the correct manner, "Sincerity of love causes the lover to become qualified by the attributes of the beloved … As they loved God, they became qualified by His Attributes to the degree appropriate for them."[62]

For Ibn ʿArabī, it is the devotion of the sincere lover, the recognition of one's own poverty and dependency upon God, the work of self-purification, and adherence to God's commands, that together facilitate a relationship of complete receptivity to God. In this process, the seeker grows increasingly closer to the Beloved, realizing the realities of the *jamāli* attributes. This epistemological priority accorded to the *jamāli* attributes for the seeker is linked to its larger ontological priority within God Himself who says in a *ḥadīth qudsī*, "My mercy precedes my wrath."[63] According to Ibn ʿArabī, life itself is a reflection of God's all-embracing compassion and is the premise of every other relationship and name attributed to God.[64] The Qur'anic invocation of the divine names *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm* at the beginning of almost every *ṣūra* (chapter) indicates a similar preponderance of God's *jamāl* more broadly in Islam.

For Ibn ʿArabī, this pervasive mercy also travels between God and human beings through the realm of human interactions. He fore-

---

62 Ibid., 2:596.
63 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 23.
64 See also Pablo Beneito, "The Presence of Superlative Compassion," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabī Society* XXIV (1998): 2–26, for a beautiful exposition on the primacy of divine mercy in Ibn ʿArabī's framework.

grounds the primacy of realizing God's *jamāli* qualities in these realms. Reflecting on the magnitude of such *jamāli* qualities, Ibn ʿArabī observes that God chooses the merciful ones from among His servants as special recipients of His grace since "He knows that the compassion that they actualize by bestowing grace on someone [else] is the property of His Names. And the Most High alone rewards them according to the measure of the Name with which they bestow grace."[65]

For the seeker, Ibn ʿArabī prioritizes the embodiment of the *jamāli* qualities of mercy, compassion, and love. These attributes of similarity between God and creation provide the furnace for the transformation of the self into the divine form of *al-Insān al-Kāmil*. This does not imply a disregard for Allah's *jalāl* but rather the seeker attempts to dissolve the unrefined *jalāli* instincts of her *al-nafs al-ammāra* in the ocean of God's *jamāli* attributes. Through this process, the individual's *jalāli* dimensions can be safely harmonized, having been purified by receptivity to God, and having maintained the limit demanded by God's incomparability. Hence, it can be inferred that God's *jalāl* in humanity emerges out of embodying God's *jamāl*. Human beings ascend through the grace of God to true vicegerency that entails a total and harmonious assimilation of all the divine qualities. Within this balance between *jamāl* and *jalāl*, the predominance of God's Mercy—a *jamāli* reality—is ever-present and constantly evoked.

For our purposes, what is also clearly illustrated in this ontological framework is that the assumption of *jamāli* attributes for human beings occurs in social contexts. A person's spiritual transformation occurs significantly through embodying certain types of behavior in relation to other people. Character is refined through cultivating social interactions based on love, mercy, compassion, and gentleness toward our fellow beings. In this framework, spiritual development demands an ethics of care that is socially engaged, and not a solitary, individualistic journey.

---

65   Ibn ʿArabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, 4:409.

Divine Attributes and the
Gendered Insān

Ibn ʿArabī's foundational understandings of God and humanity have a number of implications for gender ideology. By foregrounding the *jamāli* aspects of humanity, this approach provides not only a general critique of social hierarchies and discriminatory ideologies; it also rejects social structures that prize aggression and other unrefined *jalāli* qualities. In our world, this critique is extremely pertinent, given that these unrefined *jalāli* ways of engaging the world characterize the prevalent masculinist ways of being—not just in Islam—and these continue to bring war, destruction, suffering, and death to human lives. Over and above providing a critique of these macho social norms, Ibn ʿArabī's framework directs one to the alternatives where qualities of mercy, compassion, care, justice, generosity, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness are to be prioritized as qualities that human beings should embody. It provides a rationale for cultivating societies that value peace and justice as a necessary context for, as well as a predictable result of, the cultivation of individual character.

At this level, Ibn ʿArabī's teachings provide possibilities for a powerful, organic, and ontologically grounded critique of patriarchal power relations, both in relation to the individual and to social formations. Particularly in relation to *fiqh*, Ibn ʿArabī's framework allows one to ask whether our formulations of the law reflect an engagement with the foundational metaphysical principles of Islam. Here, Sufism with its prioritization of *jamāli* realities, where majesty (*jalāl*) always needs to be contained within an encompassing mercy (*jamāl*), potentially offers a crucial contribution to the development of a humane legal system that genuinely marries justice with mercy.

At a more specific level, Ibn ʿArabī's core concept of *al-Insān al-Kāmil* presents a pivotal understanding of human purpose that is significant in terms of its explicit gender-inclusivity. Ibn ʿArabī himself repeatedly says that *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, the standard for perfection, is ungendered, makes identical demands on men and women, and is attainable equally by both:

> Both men and women participate in all of the levels, even in being the axial saint (*al-Quṭb*). Do not let yourself be veiled by saying of the messenger of

295

God, on whom be peace and salutations: "A people who delegate governance to women will never ever prosper." For we are speaking about God's granting of authority, not peoples' granting of authority (*tawaliyāt*). The hadith addresses one whom people have given authority. In tradition, if we received nothing concerning this matter except the saying of the prophet that "women are the same as men in heritage", it would be enough. In other words, everything that a man can attain—spiritual stations, levels or qualities—can be attained by women if God wills, just as it can be attained by men, if God wills.[66]

At first blush, Ibn 'Arabī might be construed to be an apologist of the popular hadith report that purportedly states, "A people will never prosper that give a woman authority over their affairs." For many classical and even modern Muslim scholars, this report serves to disqualify women from political leadership. Situated in the heart of the canonical hadith sources, this tradition has served to reinforce and buttress patriarchal limitations on women's social power.

Here Ibn 'Arabī offers a radical new reading of this insidious and pervasive hadith tradition. By summoning the powerful visage of a ruling female saint as a counterpoint, Ibn 'Arabī opens up an unusual and refreshing ontological porthole on a hadith that has otherwise become a rather monotonous refrain among guardians of Muslim patriarchies. Given that *al-Quṭb* or the axial saint is the spiritual pivot in the hierarchy of saints, Ibn 'Arabī's assertion that women can assume this station is formidable. In the process, he limits the relevance of the above hadith to the realm of social contingencies. Arguing that this hadith has no relevance at the level of ontological reality, since at this level yet another more comprehensive hadith is in fact relevant, the hadith that states, "[W]omen are the same as men in heritage," which he argues, implies that *all* stations, levels, and attributes are accessible to both men and women equally. While remaining faithful to the textual canon Ibn 'Arabī rather adroitly negotiates contradictory prophetic traditions in a way that foregrounds gender-inclusivity and women's full participation in the work of human existence.

Ibn 'Arabī's interpretation of these *aḥadīth* is not simply a way of dichotomizing the social from the spiritual, granting women access to the latter while restricting them from the former. We know this from

---

66   Ibid., 3:89.

examining his understanding of the role of the axial saint (*al-Quṭb*). The contemporary scholar Souad al-Ḥakīm succinctly encapsulates Ibn ʿArabī's view of the axial saint of the age, and what this would imply for a woman assuming this station:

> [W]e can say that once [she becomes] a Pole [axial saint], a woman becomes possessor of the moment (*waqt*), master of the time, God's vicegerent on His earth, representative of the Envoy in his community, heir to being chosen, cloaked … [in] Adamic distinction. Around her the world turns: she arranges its governance and the needs of the entire world rest upon her. God is in solitude with her without the rest of His creation, and He beholds none but her during her time. She is the highest veil. In the Presence of *mithāl*, God erects for her a throne upon which He seats her, and then He bestows upon her all the Divine Names that the universe asks of her and she asks of Him/it. When she is seated upon the throne in the Divine Image, God orders the universe to pledge allegiance and to pay homage to her. Among her subjects are every being, high and low, except the highest of the angels, who are those lost in love (*muhayyamūn*), and the singulars (*afrād*) of mankind, over whom she has no authority because they are like her, perfect, with the aptitude for what she has received of Polehood.[67]

Clearly the encompassing, universal scale of the *Quṭb*'s role renders distinctions between the social and the spiritual realms irrelevant. The axial saint is the human being par excellence, the true vicegerent of God, and the leader of humankind at the cosmic level that pervades every other level of being.

By this deft ontological move, Ibn ʿArabī effectively dislocates notions of female inferiority. Given the ultimate priority of the spiritual realm within the Sufi framework, by asserting women's supreme spiritual capacities Ibn ʿArabī' combats prevailing beliefs that women's purported social incapacities can be related to their ontological deficiency. Hence, in Ibn ʿArabī's passage above, his reference to the *hadith* functions to recognize normative gender imbalances at the social level, and to expressly illustrate that such hierarchical social dynamics can serve to blind people from the ultimate nature of human spiritual potentialities. In effect, his reading serves to restrict, limit, and even subtly critique the applicability of the *hadith* that condemns women's

---

67   Souad al-Ḥakīm, "Ibn ʿArabī's Twofold Perception of Woman: Woman as Human Being and Cosmic Principle," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabī Society* XXXI (2002): 3.

leadership while reaffirming women's access to the highest of spiritual stations.

In another passage where Ibn ʿArabī is describing forty-nine types of sainthood based on the Qurʾanic *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*, he explicitly includes women as part of this discussion saying, "In each of these categories which we are speaking of there are men and women," and he later adds, "[T]here is no spiritual qualification conferred on men which is denied women."[68] In this section, after *each* of the saintly categories that he enunciates, Ibn ʿArabī consistently adds the phrase *min al-rijāl wa-l-nisa* (including men and women). In fact, he is clearly following the Qurʾanic lead in this case where the relevant verse delineates the various virtues of believers in both masculine and feminine terms. Indeed, Ibn ʿArabī argues that the Qurʾan itself confirms that each of the virtues that reflect varying forms of spiritual perfection is equally accessible to men and women. He points out that this inclusive verse reflects a central ontological teaching of the Qurʾan relating to human nature and genderedness. Dominant *fiqh* discourses have neglected to integrate such ontological understandings of human beings in their interpretations of the *sharīʿa*. Ibn ʿArabī's persistent reiteration of equal spiritual capacities suggests that he was speaking to an audience where such equality was also not assumed.

In addition to Ibn ʿArabī's explicit theoretical positions on the equal capacities of men and women, his autobiography reflects his experiential knowledge of such possibilities. In his writings, he discussed the spiritual authority of two of his female teachers and his devotion to them as a beloved disciple. Ibn ʿArabī reports that he frequently visited Yasmīnah or "Shams," a woman in her eighties who lived at Marchena of the Olives. Ibn ʿArabī proudly informs us that while Shams generally concealed her spiritual state from others, she would on occasion reveal it to him, since she considered him a student with unique capacities. He expresses his tremendous admiration for her many gifts, saying:

> Among people of our kind I have never met one like her with respect to the control she had over her soul. In her spiritual activities and communications she was among the greatest. She had a strong and pure heart, a noble spiritual power and a fine discrimination … She was endowed with many graces. I had

68 Ibn ʿArabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, 2:35.

considerable experience of her intuition and found her to be a master in this sphere. Her spiritual state was characterized chiefly by her fear of God and His good pleasure in her, the combination of the two at the same time in one person being extremely rare among us.[69]

Ibn ʿArabī proceeds to describe some of her supernatural abilities including her ability to perceive things and communicate at great distances as well as the power to voice people's thoughts. He states: " … her revelations were true and I saw her perform many wonders."[70]

Ibn ʿArabī accords full recognition to the spiritual mastery of a woman adept who he depicts as superior in ability and attainment to many of her contemporaries, including men. Here a woman is the model spiritual aspirant occupying the position of subject and role model in the discourse. There is nothing exclusively or traditionally female in his description of her spirituality. Her spirituality not only reflects the grace and mercy of God's qualities but also reflects qualities of mastery, strength, nobility, fine discrimination, and control of her soul. She reflects a balance of *jamāli* and *jalāli* qualities. Among Sufi masters, she is one among equals and in fact supersedes many of her peers. Ibn ʿArabī's comment about his frequent visits to her and his deep pleasure that she privately revealed the secrets of her spiritual state to him suggests not only his high regard for her, but also reveals the intense interpersonal interaction among individual Sufi men and women in that context.

Ibn ʿArabī's position, that both theoretically and practically the cultivation and embodiment of a perfect balance between *jamāl* and *jalāl* is exactly the same for male and female aspirants, has very significant implications for our understanding of gender within Sufism. It challenges interpretations of Sufi ontology that suggest women are intended to primarily reflect *jamāli* attributes while *jalāli* qualities are chiefly the prerogative of men.[71] These readings not only lend themselves to a view of gender complementarity that reinforces patriarchal stereotypes but also are theoretically inconsistent with basic Sufi assumptions on the nature of *al-Insān al-Kāmil*. Principally, they contradict the basic notion of *al-Insān al-Kāmil* as the unique human capacity to in-

---

69   Ibn ʿArabī, *Rūh al-Quds and al-Durrat al-Fākhira*, 142.
70   Ibid., 142–143.
71   See, for example, Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 49.

tegrate *all* the divine names. If men were *jalāl* and women were *jamāl*, this would limit the possibilities for either men or women to embody the full array of divine attributes. In this case, where one half of the human species is predominantly associated with a *jamāli* divine mode and the other with the *jalāli* mode, then one could say that any gendered human being is only able to reflect divinity partially. As such, humanity would lack the capacity for embodying all divine attributes, the criterion of human perfection, denying both men and women the ontological completeness inherent in this cosmology. This type of gendered reading of Ibn 'Arabī is therefore conceptually untenable and contrary to his view of the holistic nature of human spirituality embodied by the concept of *al-Insān al-Kāmil*.

Using traditional gender categories to label visions of ultimate reality has substantial political and social repercussions. It reinforces the essentialist view that women are gentle and merciful human beings who inspire love, and that men are powerful and wrathful human beings who inspire awe. Simplistically, the implication is that women are to be loved and men are to be feared. These notions of fundamentally different spiritual and emotional capacities between men and women make relationships of mutuality between the sexes difficult, instead fostering hierarchical power dynamics. These interpretations also veil the importance of *jamāli* interactions between all human beings as a central spiritual practice.

The Tawḥīdic Whole:
Spiritual and
Social Integrity

In addition to positing the equal spiritual possibilities for men and women, Ibn 'Arabī significantly connects women's ontological capacity for perfection to agency in the social realm and, specifically, in the law. For example, he presents the case of Hajar as the initiator of the *sa'y* rites during *ḥajj*, making her the creator of a legal precedent that is applicable to the entire Muslim community.[72] This socio-legal capacity, he argues, emerges only as a consequence of women's potential

---

72   Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, 1:708.

for spiritual perfection. The gendered link between spiritual capacity and the ability to set communal legal precedents reflects an explicit connection between spirituality and socio-legal space in Ibn 'Arabī's framework.

In another discussion, Ibn 'Arabī begins by informing us of a view not uncommon among other legal scholars that despite the normative position of restricted female legal testimony, there are situations where in fact one woman's legal testimony is equal to that of two men, namely, in the cases of parentage and on the subject of the waiting period after divorce ('idda).

> In some cases, one woman can play the role of two men. Usually, a judge does not make a definite judgment except with the testimony of two men. Yet in some circumstances the testimony of one woman equals that of two men. For example, the judge's acceptance of her testimony about menstrual cycles as it related to the waiting period after divorce ('idda), or the husband accepting her statement about his paternity of the child—despite the uncertainty pertaining to such situations. [Another example of this] is the acceptance of her testimony that she is menstruating. So she occupies in such situations, the position (manzalat) of two reliable male witnesses just as the man occupies the position of two women in cases of testimony about debt.[73]

Here Ibn 'Arabī points out that context and experience are principal considerations when determining gender-specific legal capacity. Such an approach suggests that legal rulings appearing to favor men per se may, in fact, simply be responsive to the realities and pragmatics of the social arena.[74] Within his context, ordinary women's experience was limited primarily to the private realm of their bodies while men were active in the public arena of commerce. The weight of their respective testimonies is related to these experiential and knowledge bases. Such a reading of the law resists the notion that there is an inherent superiority attached to male testimony. It invites us to think about the fact that legal capacity is linked to a person's expertise, knowledge, and experience. With this type of pragmatic reading, Ibn 'Arabī effectively destabilizes some of the normative gender assumptions within traditional Muslim legal discourses—within the con-

---

73 Ibid., 3:89.
74 For a thorough, considered and incisive analysis of the ways in which some premodern jurists negotiated the gendered component of women's witness and other legal capacities, see Fadel, "Two Women, One Man."

text of legal testimony he subtly unsays the dominant notion of male superiority. Moreover, his examples give salience to women's agency and legal capacity contrary to more patriarchal representations of men as primary agents.

The underlying logic of this argument suggests that law is to be responsive to and informed by changes in contexts, experiences, and knowledge. Ibn 'Arabī's approach to *fiqh* opens up ways to understand traditional legal rulings contextually and to continue dynamic, socially engaged methods to formulate the law in the contemporary period. Ibn 'Arabī continues this discussion on testimony revealing himself to be a hermeneutical acrobat presenting us with a unique, if somewhat unexpected and subversive reading of gender:

> You may also want to mention that God justifies making the testimony of two women equivalent to that of one man because of forgetfulness (*nisyān*), since He says: "So that if one of them errs, the other can remind her." ... Forgetfulness however, is also a characteristic of men. God, exalted is He, reported that Adam also was a victim of oblivion. The Prophet (peace be upon him) also said: "Adam forgot, and so did his descendants" ... In the context of testimony, however, God described one of the two women with confusion (*ḥayra*) only and he did not describe her of entire forgetfulness. Confusion is only half of forgetfulness, not all of it. See that God attributed complete forgetfulness to man, despite his readiness to reach perfection, since he said about Adam: "But he forgot and we found no firm resolve on his part" (Q 20:115). Therefore man can forget the testimony entirely while one of the women cannot forget, since she is the one who will remind the confused one. God asserts that one of the two women will remind the other, then we must believe that at least one of them will not forget, for God speaks only the truth. This means that one of the two women is characterized by one of the Divine attributes, reported by Moses, and mentioned in the Qur'an (Q 20:52): "My Lord never errs, nor forgets."[75]

Ibn 'Arabī, using a somewhat startling hermeneutic technique, completely reverses normative views of male superiority. By arguing that the Qur'an accuses men of being forgetful, while it states that one of the two women does not "err or forget" in the same way that God does not "err and forget," he is effectively making a Qur'anic argument for

---

75   Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, 3:89–90.

the ontological superiority of women. This is a genuinely iconoclastic interpretation. Ibn ʿArabī re-interprets a verse that historically and traditionally has functioned to diminish women's legal capacity. He applies a revolutionary hermeneutic to it by drawing on the Qur'an more holistically, and argues that actually the verse illustrates women's capacity for steadfastness—which is a divine attribute. He contrasts this with another Qur'anic verse that describes men as forgetful and heedless. His explanation demonstrates a deep faithfulness to the literal text of the Qur'an, reflecting Ibn ʿArabī's more mainstream or "orthodox" commitments. Yet he draws out hitherto unanticipated liberatory and heterodox meanings of law, gender, and human capacity that actively debunk normative notions of male superiority. Given that this entire discussion started off as a commentary on women's restricted legal capacity—a topic generally invoked in assertions of women's inherent deficiencies—it is significant that Ibn ʿArabī has effectively turned the argument on its head and ended up asserting women's ontological superiority.

On another topic, namely the religious requirements of physical modesty and the covering of nakedness (ʿawra), Ibn ʿArabī again articulates an egalitarian gender position. Rejecting discourses of fundamental gender difference in social responsibilities for physical modesty and the covering of nakedness (ʿawra), he states:

> Some people say that all of a woman's body, with the exception of her face and hands, constitutes the ʿawra. Another group excludes her feet from being ʿawra, while a third group considers all of her body without exception to constitute the ʿawra … In our opinion, the only parts of her body that are ʿawra are her genitals. God, the Exalted, says: "When they tasted of the tree, their shameful parts became manifest to them, and they began to sew together the leaves of the Garden over their bodies." God put Adam and Eve on equal footing regarding the covering of their shameful parts, which are their genitals. If women are still ordered to cover their bodies, it is for the sake of modesty, and not because their bodies are shameful.[76]

Again, with disarming logic and alacrity, Ibn ʿArabī debunks pervasive notions that women's bodies inherently and ontologically demand greater modesty than men's bodies. He incisively reminds us that all

---

76   Ibid., 1:408.

human beings are commanded to cover their genitals, these being the only part of men's and women's bodies that constitute the *'awra*. His statement, "If women are still ordered to cover the rest of their bodies this is for the sake of modesty," implies that modesty requirements are not ontologically driven but rather socially based. This element of social contingency is also reflected in the conditional "if" with which he begins this statement regarding the command for modesty. Since his discussion addresses the essential religious rationale underlying the hijab debate, it offers contemporary Muslims a great deal of flexibility and dynamism to harmonize religious requirements with cultural and social sensibilities on questions of physical modesty. Islamic feminists, who condemn unfair social practices that require women to take on primary responsibility for containing public sexuality through their dressing, can draw powerfully on Ibn 'Arabī's interpretation.

Another particularly innovative position on women that Ibn 'Arabī takes relates to leadership of ritual prayers, an issue that has generated a great deal of debate in contemporary times:

> Some people allow the imamate of women absolutely before a congregation of men and women. I agree with this. Some forbid her *imamate* absolutely. Others permit her *imamate* in a congregation exclusively of women. How to evaluate this? The prophet has testified about the [spiritual] perfection (*kamāl*) of some women just as he witnessed of some men, even though they may be more men than women in such perfection. This perfection is prophethood. And being a prophet is taking on the role of a leader. Thus women's imamate is sound. The basic principle is allowing women's imamate. Thus whoever asserts that it is forbidden without proof, he should be ignored. The one who forbids this has no explicit text (*naṣṣ*). His only proof in forbidding this is a shared [negative opinion] of her. This proof is insubstantial and the basic principle remains which is allowing women's *imamate*.[77]

Here again, Ibn 'Arabī links a public communal role, in this case the position of *imam* (prayer leader), with an individual's spiritual capacity. By explicitly connecting the prophet's affirmation of women's spiritual capacity to religious leadership, Ibn 'Arabī de-legitimates the position of those scholars that reject women's imamate. In this case, spiritual perfection implies equal and ungendered access to ritual

77   Ibid., 1:447.

leadership, a radically egalitarian position. While there were a few like-minded scholars on this issue of women's *imāma*, including the much earlier al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), this was certainly not a popular position. In fact, there are very few historically documented examples of women's *imāma*. Nevertheless, Ibn ʿArabī's discussion of this issue and his reference to other scholars' opinions prompt us to ask whether in fact women's *imāma* was perhaps an undocumented reality characterizing certain communities.[78] However, even if that was not the case practically, discussions of these possibilities by leading Islamic intellectuals illustrate that women's *imāma* was never in the realm of the unthinkable among Muslim thinkers. The Islamic legacy clearly contains counter-narratives of gender that destabilize patriarchal norms. In addition, implicit in Ibn ʿArabī's argument over women's *imāma* is the assumption and reality that communal prayer can and should occur in gender-inclusive spaces, a reality that is still contested in many contemporary Muslim contexts.

In reviewing these various legal positions, I am not simply making the case that Muslims have a precedent for electing gender-egalitarian ways for reforming the traditional law whether it relates to questions of women's testimony, dressing, or leadership of congregational prayers. While this might be very helpful for many, I think that Ibn ʿArabī's approach offers us resources to address deeper structural issues in the formulation of the *fiqh* in much more fundamental ways. Following his lead might suggest for us to take seriously the linkages between ontology and ungendered spiritual capacities on the one hand and particular legal positions on the other. For Islamic feminists working in the area of law and desiring to do so with fidelity to the tradition, this approach provides a way to ground expansive notions of legal equality within a deeply embedded Islamic metaphysics.[79]

Drawing on some of the lucid theoretical categories outlined by Ebrahim Moosa in his study on al-Ghazālī, I suggest that Ibn ʿArabī is one of those "frontier thinkers" within the Islamic tradition, an intellectual luminary working on the threshold of multiple narratives,

---

78   Ibn Rushd, an Andalusian contemporary of Ibn ʿArabī in his *Bidāyat al-Mujtahid* also noted the view that among the various legal positions on women's leadership of congregational prayer was one that allowed women to lead mixed congregations.

79   In developing this approach more fully, it is possible to address some of the structural problematics of gender in the traditional law as outlined in the works of Kecia Ali, "Progressive Muslims and Islamic Jurisprudence," and *Sexual Ethics in Islam*.

and creatively weaving together a variety of genres.[80] The corpus of Ibn
Arabī's work reflects not only an assimilation of the past but also inno-
vative and creative contributions addressing the concerns of his time,
an approach that often subverted and realigned the parameters of the
dominant religious imagination in fundamental ways. His intellec-
tual legacy provides us with vibrant "conditions of possibility" when
addressing questions of gender, ontology, and feminism in the twen-
ty-first century. Here Moosa's discussion of "future friendships" as orig-
inally outlined by Jacques Derrida is instructive.[81] Innovative think-
ers of the past, who might be marginalized or even exiled in their own
time, through their creativity and intellectual precociousness, are able
to speak to future generations in non-totalitarian ways resulting in an
unpredictable and undeterminable impact of their ideas in the future.
As such, they serve as heralds and precursors to intellectual commu-
nities of the future who expand and develop their ideas in novel and
relevant ways. I would like to think of this Islamic feminist project as
partially a spirited response to the hand of an "*Uwaysī*" friendship ex-
tended by Ibn 'Arabī some 700 years ago.[82]

Ibn 'Arabī's conception of *al-Insān al-Kāmil* as representing a uni-
versal standard for human perfection, one of the most pivotal tenets
in his mystical cosmology, is intimately linked to his vision of gender.
It represents the universal and genderless ethical self toward which all
aspirants, male and female, are to aspire. Ibn 'Arabī's consistent point
that gender is irrelevant to the pursuit of human perfection reflects
the normative Sufi assumption that one's inner state is the primary
criterion of human worth, a view that we find reflected in earlier Sufi
stories. As he illustrates, this view also resonates fully with Qur'anic
teachings on human nature. As such, the exoteric dimensions of hu-
man beings, including gender and biology, are considered irrelevant to
the goal of spiritual attainment. As mentioned previously, not all Sufis
in all times have pushed these inherent gender positions to their logi-
cal conclusion. Since the central principles were mediated and articu-
lated by people within particular contexts, their interpretations were

---

80 Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 38–63.
81 Ibid., 40–45.
82 *Uwaysī* relationships are a developed trope in Islamic thought. They refer to inspirational relationships with someone who is not present physically possibly also involving relations across time. See a discussion of this concept in Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination*, 43.

subject to the limitations of a contextual or individual perspective. Sometimes it meant that their interpretations were sexist. As such, it is necessary to subject these discourses to critical inquiry, measuring them against some of the central principles of Sufism.

Conclusion

By analyzing a selection of Sufi discourses in this paper, I have tried to elucidate some pervasive and foundational Islamic principles relating to human nature, endeavor, and purpose that are explicitly gender egalitarian. First, there is a full recognition of the equal agency, ability, and value of men and women who alike can realize the ultimate goals of their religion. Second, the varying dynamics of personality and psychology, the "greater jihād" against the *al-nafs al-ammāra*, and the discipline necessary for the purification of the heart, are all ungendered and apply equally to men and women. Third, on the path of submission to God, a human being should be wary of all claims of social superiority, including those based on gender difference. These claims are seen to be potential traps set by the *al-nafs al-ammāra*, able to lead a person to spiritual destruction. Fourth, in relation to gender, ontological equality informs social equality.

These principles demonstrate that there is a dynamic and transformative gender symbolism residing at the very heart of Islam. The ontological equality of men and women, the universality of the ethical ideal, the equality of human religious endeavor, and the irrelevance of gender to humanity's ultimate goals are core Islamic precepts. It is precisely these central Qur'anic assumptions about human nature foregrounded in Sufi discourse that have historically facilitated women Sufis attaining the heights of spiritual development and at times, assuming non-normative lifestyles. It also allowed some Sufi men to invoke, recognize, and celebrate the spiritual mastery of female adepts and to defend these positions religiously. It remains necessary to continuously translate these foundational teachings into social existence in all areas of Islam.

The defining dimensions of an Islamic ontological system, drawing on the Qur'an and articulated through Sufism, offer Islamic feminism both a theoretical and a methodological guide. By rigorously interro-

gating the ontological assumptions of law in relation to gender, and by engaging the law in ways informed by a holistic vision of submission that Sufism has so elaborately articulated, Islamic feminists can ensure that their search for Islamic ethics takes faith seriously. Taking faith seriously demands that we inform our socio-political lenses with a spiritual praxis that engages truth as an unfolding and dynamic process. Within this vision, law is about more than simple gender equality. It is about facilitating societies that foster the spiritual refinement of human character—a refinement to which gender equality is absolutely intrinsic. These rich resources within Sufism combined with feminist insights allow for a radical and organic critique of patriarchal societies. Such a contemporary engagement with Sufism also opens up spaces for prioritizing alternative modes of relationships—based on equality—between all human beings.