

Review of Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy (Ibn 'Arabi, Gender and Sexuality)*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press 2012, 285 pp., ISBN 978-0-8078-3533-3

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Sufi Narratives of Intimacy by Dr. Sa'diyya Shaikh, a professor in the Religious Studies Department at Cape Town University, is innovative and unique in its goals and accomplishments. It is a groundbreaking feminist study in the field of anthropology of religion, Islam, and Sufism. The main ambition of Shaikh's book is to provide a hermeneutically valid and historically grounded perspective for rethinking the most rigid and patriarchal articulations of gender in Islam via the intellectual production of the 13th century Muslim polymath Muhyīal-Dīn Ibn Al-'Arabī (d. 1240). This task, as the author argues, is of great significance, not only to contemporary and pragmatic issues of social justice and feminism, but also for the study of gender in Islam in relationship to Islamic mysticism. In particular, Ibn Arabi's thought provides new normative registers. Unlike traditional medieval Islamic scholarship (as known from the works of Ibn Taymiyyah, Al-Tabari and Al-Ghāzalī, among others), this thought challenges the divide between spiritual and social existence and thus opens new, more complex, spaces for understanding and, eventually, overturning existing gender hierarchies. While theologians and jurists are focused on the strict praxis of faith and belief, Shaikh argues, Sufis approach religion as a spiritual experience of the heart, which, in its turn, enables a more intimate and immediate connection with God (p. 10). Thus, in Sufi terms, the moral picture of the individual, traditionally structured around *islām* (outward conformity), *īmān* (inward faith), and *īhsān* (virtuous excellence), is determined entirely through a greater submission to divine will, and it pertains to all human beings regardless of their gender. The argument becomes more compelling as it is gradually revealed in the course of the book.

Sufi Narratives of Intimacy is comprised of seven chapters. In the first chapter, which is also an introduction to Sufism, Shaikh carefully situates the experiences of Sufi men and women in their historical context. Here, she refers to the great diversity of historical practices regarding gender: this helps to explain or undermine patriarchy in Islam. The second chapter centres around Ibn Arabi's religious anthropology, especially his understanding of human purpose and nature, which, Shaikh claims, translates into issues of law, gender, and society. In the third chapter, where one of the most innovative aspects of the study lies, the author examines the epistemologies of mysticism and feminism. Here, she explores Ibn Arabi's existential philosophy and personal life in depth. Ibn Arabi's own relationships with women are used as an ideal example, not only of mystical and mundane experiences coexisting, but also of how their cohabitation can produce pragmatic equality in the construction of male and female subjectivities. The fourth chapter is concerned with the hermeneutics of Ibn Arabi. Shaikh also contextualises Ibn Arabi's gender philosophy through a discussion of his overarching cosmology, including the principles of activity and receptivity. Love, desire, sex, and marriage, as they define the intimate spheres of men and women, are the main subjects of Chapters 5 and 6. Here Shaikh links some of the Abrahamic creation narratives, involving Adam and Eve as they have been represented in classical Islamic exegesis, to Ibn Arabi's views on gender. The purpose of this is two-fold: to see Ibn Arabi's oeuvre in the context of the major interpretative and theological traditions of the time, and to explore Arabi's innovative thinking in terms of gender. Shaikh refers to a specific construct in Ibn Arabi's thought, the figure of the divine feminine, which portrays God as being most perfectly witnessed in women. The reason for this is women's inimitable ability of sexual intimacy and empathy, which are both intricately linked to superior knowledge of God. In the final chapter, Shaikh situates her work theoretically in the fields of feminism and religion. She concludes with the innovative aspects of her reading of Ibn Arabi, which open up, as she puts it, 'vibrant conditions of possibility' (p. 32) for contemporary Islamic feminism. Shaikh does justice to the historical weight of Ibn Arabi as an intellectual thinker. He was a 'frontier thinker' who is particularly notable in the history of Islam, with works in all kinds of analytic and artistic genres, and it is admirable how Shaikh navigates through the original sources of his writing as well as through existing works on him with ease. However, even beyond this historical interpretation, the unmatched merit of Shaikh's study is in her sensitivity towards the complexity and profundity of the religious concepts involved: classic, liberal and conservative, patriarchal and emancipated constructs of gender.

Reading historically the oeuvre of Ibn Arabi allows Shaikh to undertake two major analytical steps that contribute to the scholarly value of her study. First, staying close to the original sources she is able to posit gender as an intrinsic part of Ibn Arabi's Islamic cosmology and from there to articulate (via his ideas) a comprehensive framework for new and emancipatory politics of gender which is beyond the legal trappings of the mainstream Islamic tradition. This new politics is entirely based on the organic mixture between spiritual attainment and social justice. Such an analytical attempt is currently non-existent in the scholarly literature on religion and gender and, most probably, Shaikh's work will serve as a landmark study for future attempts at development in this direction. And second, despite the fact that Shaikh's inherent project is to impact contemporary readings and praxis of Islam, another real virtue of her work is the emphasis on

reading Ibn Arabi in his own context and time. The numerous transitions that Shaikh makes between present issues related to patriarchy and Islam on the one hand, and Ibn Arabi's Sufism on the other hand, does not prevent her from respecting the circumstances and historical location of the historical sources. This is why Shaikh insists that Sufism is not an automatic panacea for problems of sexism and gender injustice (p. 12) but nonetheless one should pay attention to its gender-egalitarian impulses. In that respect a particularly precious moment in the study is the overturning of the somewhat existent stereotype in the academic literature, due to complicated power politics today and in history, about the docile and submissive follower of Sufism who always constitutes the image of the 'good Muslim'. Shaikh's study suggests that Sufism, in addition to being spiritual and mystic, could actually be viewed as an active political platform which not only empowers its followers but also encourages them, from within Islam, to be active social agents.

Rich, original and illuminating as it is, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy* nonetheless invites some points of debate – as any serious scholarly endeavour does – that are related to Shaikh's basic assumptions as well as to some of the limitations of her work.

First, while it is obvious that the main commitment of Shaikh's work is to use a classic Muslim thinker to speak to contemporary issues of sexism and gender inequality in Muslim societies, one should be aware of the possible limitations to this approach. Speaking from his historical location in the 13th century, Ibn Arabi's thought, defined by Sufi mysticism, was largely marginalized by the dominant theological authorities of his own time. The collective Muslim doctrine, organized, for example, in its Sunni variants, around the four theological schools of jurisprudence (Asharite, Hanbalite, Hanafi, and Shafi'i, and their respective authorities) had at the time already forged and legally addressed all formal definitions of gender, creating a stable and continuous tradition of public articulation of gender roles, especially in the context of such pragmatic issues as inheritance rights, marriage laws, education, healthcare and public and private duties. In all contemporary countries where the Shari'a law forms an active part of the legal system, remnants of all these classical Muslim traditions still exist and they openly reproduce today the patriarchal stereotypes of the historical times in which they were created. Moreover, these legal traditions are also reified and highly authoritative fundamentals of the praxis of Islam, and their reinterpretation is often highly contested, if not resisted with hostility. A more recent example in that respect is the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights, signed by all represented states in the Organization of Islamic Conference, where, according to article 6 'woman is equal to man in human dignity' but not in rights. The reason for this is that, as probably the most controversial Surah 4, verse 34 of the Qur'an, prescribes, 'Men are elevated (Arab. *qawwamauna*) above women, for God has placed them so by nature'. Therefore, a major question that I would like to raise in the pragmatic field is whether a marginal Sufi thinker from the 13th century can or should become a part of mainstream public philosophy today that would generate change in the many different but overlapping Muslim ways of life.

I am aware that, as far as the last point is concerned, Shaikh would probably recommend, as her overall work conveys, a feminist hermeneutical engagement with the main authorities of classical patriarchal Islamic exegesis. Yet, despite

the fact that feminist hermeneutics is a highly important intellectual exercise and is charged with controversy, an important methodological challenge for such historical studies as *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy* (an essentially feminist work) from the point of view of contemporary Islamic feminism remains: what would account for the social authority and public acceptance of the interpretations of feminist Quranic hermeneutics beyond the academia? Further, what compromises and concessions will Islamic feminist hermeneutics have to make in order to popularize its conclusions in a language understandable by people who are unfamiliar with or biased against hermeneutics and feminism, both of which are considered Western intellectual inventions?

Second, even if one admits that it is feasible for Ibn Arabi to be recognized and respected by dominant Muslim public belief as an intellectual who recommended gender equality, there is a hidden tendency here, which somehow recommends the same logic that informs those (usually the ones against whom Shaikh's work is targeted) who look for a justification in Muslim history for every present action. These 'translations' from the past to the present are at the centre of Shaikh's methodological design of the *Sufi Narrative of Intimacy* and even though they are offered with subtlety and precision, the author does not offer a reflection on their possible limitations. Moreover, those translations have a historical limit to them that should be taken into consideration. Ibn Arabi is, doubtless, an important figure in the medieval intellectual universe of Islam, but there are gender issues today to which the thought and practice of a 13th century philosopher can hardly respond. What, for example, is the significance of Ibn Arabi's thought for such contemporary issues in the field of gender theories as transgendered people or same-sex marriage, or the adoption of children by same-sex couples? What is his attitude towards the analytical deconstruction of gender, which goes beyond the categories of 'male' and 'female'? Engagement with these questions is of the utmost significance to contemporary Islamic feminism, if it is an academic field to be taken seriously, and they cannot be answered solely through reference to past authorities, even if those authorities were the most liberal and progressive thinkers of their own time. Moreover, gender as an analytical category did not exist in 13th century Islam. On the other hand, if those issues could be addressed through the ideas of Ibn Arabi, as Shaikh's general pathos against patriarchy via Ibn Arabi suggests, then a reflection on how medieval Islamic thought fits into the changing parameters of historical time is indispensable to the study.

Finally, there is a tendency in Shaikh's work to undermine the patriarchal structures that inform much of Ibn Arabi's thinking (p. 12), even though she declares many times throughout the book that Ibn Arabi's philosophy is based on an amalgamation between patriarchal inclinations and gender egalitarianism (pp. 61–95). Sometimes, however, glossing the text with anti-patriarchal virtues may not be a sign of liberation. The readers of Ibn Arabi do not simply need to 'discover' gender equality when encountering the original text, but rather, they need to be aware that such precious norms as equality, social justice, and freedom are achievable only in conversation with the text. That is to say that the principles of human emancipation are not written once and for all by one supreme intellectual, but they are, in the end, a collective human invention.