

Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality

Sa'diyya Shaikh

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Sa'diyya Shaikh's groundbreaking *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* not only makes a significant contribution to the growing body of scholarship on issues of gender and Islam, but also serves as an eloquent and accessible introduction to the life and work of Muhyi al-Din ibn Arabi, unquestionably one of the most important voices in the Islamic tradition. Moreover, it is a rigorous piece of academic scholarship rooted in a thorough knowledge of Islam's primary sources and a sophisticated understanding of contemporary methodology, both in the academic study of religion and women and gender studies. At the same time, it adds significantly to normative discussions within Islam – the crucial debates about gender and sexuality, the ongoing arguments on the nature of authority in Islam, and the role of *fiqh*, *kalām*, and Sufism within the Muslim tradition. It succeeds brilliantly as a scholarly examination of Ibn Arabi's work and as an example of feminist scholarship at its very best.

For me, the most important aspect is how the book functions as an introduction to the thought of Ibn Arabi, a notoriously demanding thinker whose work can sometimes appear impenetrable. As a result, much of the previous scholarship on him, including the essential and pioneering work of William

Chittick, Sachiko Murata, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, can itself be difficult to understand, especially for non-specialists. The author has presented us with an extremely readable and understandable volume that makes this thinker accessible to wide range of potential readers. In large part this is because, as her title suggests, Shaikh understands the important role of narrative as a vehicle for transmitting ideas in the Sufi tradition. In fact, her book begins with a particularly compelling narrative, which itself begins with the wonderful phrase “once upon a time,” to describe a fourteenth-century *khutbah* in Cairo delivered by the female scholar Umm Zaynab Fatima bint Abbas al-Baghdadiyyah. The narrative notes that although she was well-received by her audience, one of her teachers, the renowned Hanbali scholar Ibn Taymiyyah, experienced great discomfort and irritation upon seeing a woman on the *minbar*. That night he had a dream in which Prophet Muhammad appeared to him and rebuked him for this feeling, pointing out that she was, in fact, a pious woman.

Shaikh thus begins her discussion of gender and sexuality by showing Ibn Taymiyyah, whom she accurately describes as “an individual whom many present day chauvinists claim as their religious luminary” (p. 2) subdued by a prophetic command in a dream. In so doing, she situates her work in the context of contemporary debates about women presenting the *khutbah* and women-led prayer, demonstrating that such activities are part of a much longer debate. Following this narrative, she then pivots to bring in Ibn Arabi and suggests that his voice is particularly important in the current context of debates about gender and authority in Islam.

Our perspectives on this fraught contemporary debate might be enriched by the counsel provided by the eminent thirteenth century Muslim scholar, Muhyi al-Din ibn al-‘Arabi. In a striking contrast to the present-day focus on women’s bodies as the inappropriate provocateur of desire, the pre-modern Ibn ‘Arabi has a very different entry point for the understanding of gendered ritual leadership. He unperturbedly claims ungendered and equal access to the position of imam on the basis that men and women have identical spiritual potential in the Islamic tradition. (p. 3)

With this as her starting point, the author goes on to explain Ibn Arabi’s “assumptions on the nature of gendered human beings in light of his ontological, spiritual and religious telos” (p. 3). It should be noted that she never falls into a simplistic binary that posits a “good” egalitarian Sufi tradition against a “bad” patriarchal Islamic legal tradition. Shaikh is well aware of the patriarchal and androcentric currents within the Sufi tradition and of how Ibn Arabi was very much a man of his own historical context. As she eloquently and succinctly states:

While Ibn Arabi was both a man of his time grounded in a patriarchal context and a human being whose mystical imagination mapped gender in ways that allow multiple readings and particularly expansive ways for understanding the human condition, his ideas offer emancipatory possibilities for contemporary Muslims. (pp. 119-20)

Sufi Narratives of Intimacy provides its readers with a wealth of information about and insights into Ibn Arabi's life and thought. While it focuses specifically on issues of gender, this focus, rather than narrowing the book's range, provides it with a lens into the larger worldview of his thought because, as the author makes clear throughout, gender is a not a peripheral concern, but rather a central aspect, of the human condition. As the book unfolds, it places Ibn Arabi in the context of the larger historical Sufi tradition, addresses his remarkable religious anthropology (which the author suggests arises in part because of the importance of his relationships with women, including spiritual teachers, throughout his life), and explores the implications of his thought for Islamic feminism. I found the discussion of Ibn Arabi's interpretations of the Qur'anic narratives of Adam's creation and the traditional accounts of Eve's creation from Adam particularly compelling: Ibn Arabi posits that the first human being was, in reality, a gender-inclusive androgyne who only became a separate male and female entity after the female part was extracted from this first androgynous being. This view denies the ontological primacy of maleness to the condition of being human while stressing the inherent and intimate connection between men and women.

The book is particularly suitable for use in a variety of classroom settings. In my undergraduate introductory course on Islam, I find that my students are frequently drawn to topics related to gender as well as those related to Sufism and Ibn Arabi. Recently, when they have shown an interest in writing their research papers on either or both of these topics, I have unhesitatingly sent them to *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*. They find it thoroughly readable and come away with important insights and understandings about issues of gender and the Sufi tradition. For many years I have been looking for a monograph on Ibn Arabi to assign in my upper-level seminar on Sufism. I need look no further. I am looking forward to using this in a seminar format together with my students because it is, in my opinion, simply the best and most accessible introduction to Ibn Arabi available and will inevitably generate a fascinating conversation. I thoroughly recommend it.

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