

Book Reviews

Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ‘Arabī, Gender and Sexuality, by Sa‘diyya Shaikh. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012, xi + 285 pp.

This important and, I would suggest, seminal book continues and consolidates work done by female scholars such as Sachiko Murata, Rkia Cornell and Souad Hakim on gender issues as informed by the Sufi tradition. Sa‘diyya Shaikh begins her thought-provoking exposition with a moving description of her own experience of witnessing, for the first time, in 1994, a woman preaching to a mixed-gender congregation in the Claremont Main Mosque in Cape Town. When the women moved to the centre of the mosque, Shaikh describes it as feeling ‘like stepping into the warmth of the sunshine after a life-time of being concealed in the shadows – a feeling somewhat akin to voting in my country of birth for the first time [the first non-racial democratic elections having taken place in South Africa in the same year]’ (p. 4).

In her search for a metaphysic and a ‘religious anthropology’ that chimes with the aspirations of modern women like herself, Shaikh has turned to the work of Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240). His exposition, she believes, whilst being firmly based upon the Qur’an and Hadith, defines an ontology and a view of human nature in which men and women have an equal capacity for completeness. Combining historical analysis with a wide-ranging knowledge of his metaphysical writings in the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* and *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, she argues that Ibn ‘Arabī’s ‘nuanced’ and ‘fluid’ notions of gender ‘offer a twenty-first century audience *Copernican possibilities for transformation*’ (p. 228, italics mine). This is a large claim, but Shaikh does not make it in a naïve or simplistic manner. Rather, she supports it through a careful and thoughtful feminist analysis that reflects the complexity of her subject matter and, in particular, recognises the difficulties of translating metaphysics, especially those from within a mystical tradition, into socio-political realities.

The first part of the book contains two chapters dealing with the historical aspect. Chapter 1 covers the role of women within the Sufi tradition before the time of Ibn 'Arabī. This reveals a range of attitudes, from the misogynistic view of the early ascetics such as 'Alī b. 'Uthmān al-Hujwīrī (d. between 465/1072 and 469/1077), who saw sexuality, and thus women, as a vice and a distraction from the mystical path, to the more open approaches of mystics such as Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 298/910) and Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), who believed that the love of women and children were part of the natural and licit human disposition. Beyond that there is the love mysticism of people such as Rūzbehān Baqlī (d. 606/1209), who understood relationship with women to be a means of worshipping the beauty of the Divine.

Chapter 3 deals with Ibn 'Arabī's own relationships with the women in his life – not only the famous encounter with Nizām, the beautiful young daughter of a Meccan shaykh to whom he dedicated *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, but also his female teachers, his sisters and mother, his daughters and, later, his female disciples to whom he devoted a series of poems in his *Dīwān* (some of which are translated here for the first time). Shaikh argues that he had exceptionally close relationships with women, as evinced by an experience he relates in the *Futūḥāt* concerning the Day of Resurrection, in which God allowed him to intercede on behalf of the first people that he saw. The first four of these, and the only ones mentioned by name, turn out to be women: his sisters, his wife and another woman. The importance of women to him is also demonstrated by the fact that he gives so many accounts of them in his writings, contrary to the normal practice of male writers of his time. Such attention is explained by Ibn 'Arabī himself, when he describes in another passage of the *Futūḥāt*, how, in midlife, his own attitude towards women was changed by God from an ascetic aversion to love (p.99), saying: 'God made them lovable to me, and I am the greatest in compassion towards them and in guarding their rights, because in this matter I am acting on insight (*baṣīra*)' (*Fut.*IV:84).

This leads Shaikh to comment that Ibn 'Arabī's 'gender lenses are directly informed by his mystical insights', which then

takes her into a discussion about the nature of mystical experience (p. 99). To what extent is it universal and acultural, as proposed by thinkers such as William James, and to what extent is it necessarily influenced by a person's culture and life experience, as theorists such as Steven Katz have maintained? The latter would imply that Ibn 'Arabī's positive relationships with women predisposed him to experiences – and hence to a metaphysics and cosmology – which emphasise the female aspect and what Shaikh calls 'the *jamālī* attributes' of compassion and beauty. She herself takes a middle way on the issue, but the very raising of it in this chapter indicates the richness that a feminist perspective which critiques the interface between subjectivity and objectivity can bring to the study of mystical traditions.

Chapters 4 to 6 are devoted largely to analyses of Ibn 'Arabī's writings on gender, covering his interpretations of Qur'anic passages which discuss male/female relations, both within society and in the intimacy of marriage; his position on the legal status of women; and his cosmology, in which the interaction of the active (male) principle with the passive (female) principle is a central motif. These are interwoven at almost every point of the argument, and Shaikh constantly emphasises the 'nuanced' (her favourite word) nature of Ibn 'Arabī's exposition, in which meanings are not fixed but constantly change according to context, and in which paradox and subtlety are always operative. She identifies three basic approaches to gender within his work, and argues that all of them must be taken together to give an adequate picture of his understanding.

First is an approach that accepts the basic Islamic texts concerning gender relationships, although Ibn 'Arabī often interprets them in a way that subverts or radically changes the usual understanding. One example is his support of the important idea that gender is a metaphor, or a description of an internal state, which is not necessarily determined by biology. Thus Ibn 'Arabī argues that cosmologically, in a universe which is fundamentally gendered, masculinity means activity, femininity means passivity, and both men and women can express both aspects. Related to this is the idea – not unique to Ibn 'Arabī but very much present in his thought – that 'manliness' or *rujūliyya*,

an important concept within the Sufi tradition, stemming from its tradition of chivalry, is a state of attainment open to both men and women. On this basis, he supports the position of those who maintain that a woman can lead a congregation of men in prayer if she is in a higher degree of realisation than they are.

In other cases, Ibn 'Arabī interprets well-known traditions in his own unique way. Shaikh gives an example in Chapter 5, in a discussion on the hadith in which Eve is described as being created from Adam's rib. Because the rib is bent, this is often interpreted in patriarchal contexts to mean that women are inherently crooked or defective. But in Ibn 'Arabī's understanding, the meaning of 'bending' is positive, indicating a women's compassionate inclination and affection towards her husband and children. Furthermore, he attributes the same quality to men, in that they, too, 'bend and incline towards their families with love and empathy' (p. 162).

The second and more radical approach that Shaikh identifies is that of universal humanity, i.e. Ibn 'Arabī's assertion that the quality of humanity (*insāniyya*) is ungendered, and thus both men and women share equally in it. On this basis, he takes what is, within an Islamic context, a controversial position in asserting that: 'Everything that a man can attain – spiritual stations, levels or qualities – can be attained by a woman if God wills, just as they can be attained by men if God wills' (p. 84, *Fut.*III:89).

Further, in discussing the creation of Eve from Adam, Ibn 'Arabī emphasises that both are described in the Qur'an as being made 'in the image of God'. He even brings an alternative version of the creation story, in which Eve is independently brought to life by God, His spirit being breathed into her directly after she has been formed from Adam's rib. The two primordial human beings are then depicted as being equal in their support of one another: 'So Adam rested in her, and she rested in him, and she was a garment for him, and he was a garment for her' (p. 192).

The third, and most radical approach, is found in the places where Ibn 'Arabī asserts the superiority of the female over

the male. Shaikh's argument here revolves largely around two themes. The first is the feminine gender of the Divine Essence, as expounded in the chapter of Muḥammad in the *Fuṣūṣ*, which for Ibn 'Arabī implies that the ultimate generative force of creation is feminine in nature; thus Adam stands 'between the divine essence, from which he is manifested, and a woman, who is manifested from him' (p. 174). Shaikh does not understand such passages as indicating the dominance of the female over the male – dominance is after all a male/patriarchal quality – but rather that the underlying creative force which permeates all things is powerful precisely because it encompasses both aspects of activity and passivity.

The second theme is Ibn 'Arabī's assertion in the *Futūḥāt* that the woman is the 'choicest part' (*naqāwa*) of the human archetype – a term that implies refinement, suggesting 'a distilled or purified essence' (p. 158). Throughout the final three chapters of the book, Shaikh explores the different ways in which this principle is interpreted by Ibn 'Arabī as a counterpoise to the Qur'anic assertion that men have 'a degree' of superiority over women (Q.2:228). Sometimes this is interpreted in a quite literal way, proposing that Eve, brought into creation after Adam, is a more developed version of humanity. Sometimes it is interpreted to indicate the superiority of women in procreation, or, more mystically, the superiority of the receptive attributes over the active in the spiritual life. The most important meaning, though, is that it leads to the pivotal idea, also developed at length in the final chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ* on the Muḥammadian wisdom, that the contemplation of the Divine/Reality in women – or more generally within male/female relationships – is the most perfect mode available to us. Thus, much of Chapter 6 is devoted to the principle that love and desire – as opposed to domination and discrimination – are the most refined and perfect modes of interaction between the genders. In asserting this, Ibn 'Arabī consciously regarded himself as an heir to the Prophet Muḥammad, following in his footsteps in adhering to the famous hadith which Shaikh renders as: 'Three things of this world of yours have been made lovable to me: women and perfume – whilst the coolness of my eye was placed in ritual prayer' (p. 165).

This very brief and inadequate survey of some major issues should give a sense of the huge range of topics that this book covers. For anyone unfamiliar with Ibn ‘Arabī’s worldview, there is no doubt that it should be essential reading. For those who have some familiarity, however, it is perhaps a little disappointing in places that Shaikh relies so heavily on well-known material, so that many sections constitute excellent summaries or syntheses but add little to well-established knowledge. In the historical survey in Chapter 1, for instance, much of her material is drawn from early commentators such as Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d.412/1021) and Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d.618/1221), and does not go beyond the well-tilled ground of hagiographies of pre-eleventh-century saints.¹ She does not bring any examples of women who lived in later centuries, or discuss in any detail the strong tradition of female scholarship which developed at certain times and places. For instance, we now know, through books such as Asma Sayeed’s *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam*, that female Hadith scholarship was flourishing during Ibn ‘Arabī’s time,² but Shaikh makes only passing reference to this when she mentions the ‘learned expert’ Fakhr al-Nisā’ bint Rustam, Niẓām’s aunt, from whom he received transmission in Mecca (p.103).³ Nor does she discuss the level of participation of the female disciples whom she identifies through Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Dīwān*. Although their virtues are described there in glowing terms, very few women are listed as having taken part in the readings

1. al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr an-niswa al-muta‘abbidāt aṣ-Ṣūfiyyāt*, translated by Rkia Cornell (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999). Also, ‘Aṭṭār, *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, translated by A.J. Arberry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

2. Asma Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

3. Similarly, Shaikh makes no mention of the extraordinary commentary – perhaps unique within the Islamic tradition – on Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Kitāb Mashāhid al-asrār* by Sitt al-‘Ajām a couple of centuries after his death, based upon her own visionary experience. See Sitt al-‘Ajām, *Sharḥ al-mashāhid al-qudsiyya*, edited by Souad Hakim and Bakri Aladdin (Damascus: al-Ma‘had al-Faransī li-l-Sharḥ al-Awsaṭ, 2004).

of texts that are recorded in the manuscript base. For instance, in the *samā'* recording attendees at the reading of the *Futūḥāt* in Damascus in the last few years of Ibn 'Arabī's life, out of several hundred names we find only one woman, Umm Dalāl bint al-Zakī Aḥmad al-Mawṣilī, who appears in four or five sessions.⁴ It would have been nice to have had some comment from Shaikh about this situation; were the women studying the texts, but due to the custom of keeping their names private not listed? Or were they excluded from such sessions for some reason? Were many of them illiterate, for example?

Similarly, some of the more metaphysical issues, such as the matter of *rujūliyya* and *insāniyya*, have been widely discussed in Ibn 'Arabī circles for many years now. Sachiko Murata's excellent and comprehensive *Tao of Islam*, for example, appeared in 1992, and thus it was only in the later chapters, where Shaikh moves into discussion of Ibn 'Arabī's more alternative gender models, that I myself began to feel real excitement about the ideas that she is putting forward.⁵

Nevertheless, this is a very important, and – as I said at the beginning of this review – seminal book which should be read by anyone concerned about gender relationships, whether they are within the Islamic tradition or not. As it pertains specifically to the role of women within Islam, it is immensely valuable, given that basic principles of equality and justice that are so accepted now in the Western world that we barely acknowledge them as issues, are not accepted in many Islamic societies. Whilst Shaikh is cautious in predicting the impact that metaphysics can have upon socio-political realities, she also rightly argues that a loosening-up of rigid and dogmatic interpretations of the sacred texts is an essential part of political change and bringing about full human rights for women. On this basis, she critiques Murata, who, she feels, is content that the alternative

4. See Osman Yahia, *Histoire et Classification de l'Oeuvre d'Ibn 'Arabī* (Damascus, Institut français de Damas., 1964), pp.212–22, *samā'* 21, 29, 34, 38, 44.

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

gender identities that she herself outlines should be expressed only at a personal or interior level. Shaikh is interested in the way in which these ideas can change our perceptions at every level, and her position, I would argue, is entirely compatible with Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of Reality. What he brings us is an integrated vision in which the external and the internal reflect, and cannot ultimately be separated from, each other.

As it pertains more generally to twenty-first-century culture, much of the early exposition may have value only insofar as it gives insight into the position of women living within an Islamic context. I have found that even the concept of *rujūliyya* fails to strike a chord with young Western people, who have been brought up and educated within a framework of equality and therefore see no reason why attributes of power and activity – or indeed, any human attribute – should be considered the exclusive domain of one gender rather than another. The same goes for alternative models of gender roles; Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding may seem radical to those brought up within a conservative religious context, but in modern Western societies, where there is increasing acceptance of same-sex marriage and the rights of transgender people, these are becoming common ideas.

But where the book does have a universal resonance for both men and women, I feel, is firstly, in its emphasis upon the spiritual meaning of gender relations. Whilst people in Western cultures hardly need to be convinced of the importance of love and passion in intimate relationships, the spiritual dimensions are very far from understood. Thus Ibn ‘Arabī’s insight opens up important possibilities of integration between our relationships with other human beings and our relationship with God.

Secondly, and more important, Ibn ‘Arabī gives us a way forward in finding our universal humanity, beyond the attributes of gender. This is because he points to the possibility of finding ways of relating to each other on the basis of our real equality – i.e. that we are all equally made in the image of God/Reality – and of acknowledging our common humanness within the context of a unified Reality. In this respect Ibn ‘Arabī’s subtle but powerful vision – which, as Shaikh’s exposition emphasises,

on the one hand acknowledges the reality of gender and on the other allows us to go beyond it in our journey towards spiritual completion – is still at the cutting edge of thought. As such, it does indeed hold out the possibility of a change in human society that, if universally embraced, could be likened to that wrought by Copernicus.

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