

# Spiritual Empowerment Through Spiritual Submission

## Sufi Women and Their Quest for God

by Amila Buturovic

*Cet article analyse les fondations historiques du Sufisme, une forme de mysticisme islamique, tout en examinant comment ce mouvement a donné aux femmes la possibilité de faire un choix personnel concernant leur foi.*

Islamic mysticism, or Sufism (*Tasawwuf*), emerged in early Islamic history as an ascetic movement that espoused individual salvation away from physical pleasures and material gains. Early Muslim ascetics, known as Sufis because of the wool (*suf*) garment they wore on their bare bodies, found roots in the long ascetic tradition of the Near East, though their immediate inspiration was the life of prophet Muhammad and the teachings of the *Qur'an*. In the course of its development, Sufism grew into a mass movement which resulted in a transformation of its original aim of individual salvation into an organized, institutionalized path known as Sufi order (*tariqa*). By the end of the eleventh century, the Sufi orders were credited with not only cementing the faith of devotees who came from all walks of life, but also spreading Islam beyond the existing boundaries of the Islamic empire.

As a method of knowing God and understanding the pattern that governs both individual and collective existence, Sufism can be characterized as an esoteric interpretation of the *Qur'an*, counterbalancing Islamic law's emphasis on the esoteric. In Sunni Islam, which represents the tradition of the majority of the Muslims, Islamic law (the *Shri'a*) espouses community consensus (*ijma'*) in an attempt to extend the boundaries of

divine ethics beyond the explicit rules and regulations mentioned in the sacred texts (the *Qur'an* and the Prophetic traditions). Contrary to this, the Sufi order places emphasis on taste (*dhawq*), a highly subjective method of charting out the ethical path.



Kass Elan Morgain, "Prayer Flags," collage, 13" x 13", 1989.  
Photo: Robert Hawkins

Taste, of course, is a highly personal affair that may or may not be shared by anyone else: in Sufism, the emphasis on taste as a subjective endeavour for salvation encourages common folk to probe their own understanding of the divine message. Their "taste," that is, an intuitive feel for the essence of the *Qur'anic* message, results in personalizing the transcendental divine. In practical terms, this Sufi scheme is antithetical to the postulates of Islamic law which, though implying a collective search as well, nevertheless assumes a highly elitist undertaking, reserved solely for the literate minority elite (the *ulama'*). This elite is not only privileged by

literacy standards, but is also male. The official religious education required for theological and legal reasoning is available to men only, as it is conducted in a public space not accessible to women. The official discourse thus excludes women, as well as illiterate society at large. Sufism, on the other hand, is an antidote to such a discourse of exclusion, as it opens the door to all Muslims who look for a personal interaction with the divine message of the *Qur'an*.

In medieval Islamic history women saw in the Sufi path the restoration of their divinely granted space. The attitude of Sufi men towards Sufi women was quite ambivalent; it ranged from labelling women a distraction to a pious soul to admiration and veneration of female Sufi saints. Sufism allowed no gender privileges.

It based itself in the *Qur'anic* message, which, perhaps more explicitly than any other sacred text in a monotheistic tradition, addresses women independently and comprehensively. The *Qur'an* lays out the duties for both sexes, in social matters as well as issues of faith, granting a clear equality of men and women in the latter. In the chapter on women (33:35), the *Qur'an* states:

For Muslims men and Muslims women  
for believing men and believing women  
for devout men and devout women  
for truthful men and truthful women  
for men and women who are patient and constant  
for men and women who are humble

for men and women who give in  
charity  
for men and women who fast  
and deny themselves  
for men and women who engage  
much in praising God  
for them all God has prepared  
forgiveness and great reward.

Thus, the *Qur'anic* revelation clearly binds, in not only ethical but ritual terms, both men and women equally,

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judging their merits in accordance with individual commitment rather than sex. Yet social reality indicates that Muslim women have not been given a due share in the for-

mulation of Islamic doctrines, largely thanks to the appropriation of religious discourse by the male learned elite in the centuries following Muhammad's revelations. Islamic law gravitates to a patriarchal mode of living in which women have no direct public influence and thus no chance to undertake the necessary education. Though one should not underestimate the pedagogical power that women enjoy in their homes, they have had no access to the legal and theological reasoning of the male elite.

With its emphasis on the small world as a reflection of the larger world, the Sufi path provides a necessary alternative for the spiritual empowerment of Muslim women and an encouragement to address the issues of divine transcendence and inner purification outside the boundaries of the official discourse.

In a nutshell, Sufism teaches that every creation partakes of the divine essence. To this end, Sufis quote the divine words which God is believed to have said to Muhammad: "I was a hidden treasure and I wanted to be known, so I created the world." Creation is thus the result of God's desire for self-reflection, all animate and inanimate beings are but God's manifestations. The underlying intent of the Sufi discourse asserts that the

heart is the site of divine essence. Penetrating through the outward layers of one's existence leads the individual to the self contained in the heart. Thus, undertaking this process of knowing oneself paves the way to the spiritual purification of the heart. In the Sufi terminology, knowing oneself means removing the veils that separate individual consciousness from divine consciousness. The following verses of a tenth-century Sufi poet perhaps best summarize this:

I wonder at those who make  
pilgrimage to Ka'ba.  
Verily, Ka'ba is on our own  
hearts.

The path to God is open to anyone ready for the arduous process of spiritual unveiling; the final goal is the annihilation of the human self in the divine self. Since the eleventh century, this process has been done in Sufi orders (*tariqas*) through the rituals of *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and *sama'* (listening to music), under a careful supervision of the Sufi master (*sheik*), who is trusted as the attainer of truth. (In the West, the best known Sufi order is the Mevlevi order, called in English the Whirling Dervishes.)

Even before it became a mass movement, Sufism was known for its female followers. Sufi women, just as male Sufis, traced their way of living in prophet Muhammad's life and, as stated earlier, referred themselves to the hidden meanings of the *Qur'an*. Moreover, Sufi women traced their spiritual lineage to Muhammad's wives and daughters, starting with his wife Khadija, who is also generally known as the first convert to Islam. Though a powerful businesswoman, Khadija was well respected for her piety and devotion, and, just like her husband Muhammad, she set the example that asceticism was not obligatory for the inner quest for God.

For most of the women in early Islamic history whose social space centred on families and chores, this was an encouraging indication that family life was not incompatible with the Sufi teachings. As a consequence,

one finds numerous stories about women who balanced their family responsibilities with their spiritual needs in a very determined manner. For example, a story is related about Fatima Umm Ali of the ninth century who travelled to the house of one of the greatest Sufis of the time, Bayazid Bistami, in search for guidance. Upon arriving at his house, Umm Ali took off her veil and proceeded to converse with Bistami about spiritual matters. Her husband, witnessing the candid manner in which his wife addressed another man, became uncomfortable and, upon leaving Bistami's house, asked: "How can you be so impudent with Bayazid?" She replied:

You are my physical nature's consort, Bayazid is my spiritual confidant. I attain my physical desire through you; through him, I reach God. The fact that he does not need my company, but you do, demonstrates this. (Nurbakhsh 93)

From many other anecdotes about women who tried to reconcile their spirituality with family life, we can trace a dual pattern of *islam* and *ihsan*—"submission" and "excellence." While the former is the name of the religion itself, implying total submission to one God, the latter adds a strong Sufi colouring. "Excellence" refers to spiritual excellence achieved through "*islam*." Where the law prescribes five prayers a day to all those who submit, i.e., Muslims, excellence prescribes much more than that. It requires a continuous remembrance of God and thus, a complete spiritual submission. But the road to excellence is paved with individual taste. Thus, some women viewed excellence as a continuous prayer, some as silence, others as love or fear of God. For example, a Sufi woman by the name of Rabi'a of Syria (d. 850) is said to have come before her husband every night with the same question: "do you have any needs?" If he did, she would perform them. Then she would separate from him, make

her ablutions, and remain in worship until morning. Another woman, Umm Hayyan, was known never to speak to anyone between dawn and evening, because she was engaged in the silent recitation of the *Qur'an*. After the evening prayer, she would finally engage in her worldly duties, conversation with her family, and household tasks.

In addition to a great number of women who courageously balanced

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out their family responsibilities with spirituality, early Sufi history records many women who gave up their social self in favour of an ascetic life-style in which the

only object of attention and devotion—both physically and spiritually—was God. Among these women that come from different social and ethnic backgrounds, the most famous is Rabi'a al-Adawiyya (d. 801). Not only is Rabi'a the most famous Sufi woman, but she is also, as one scholar put it, the first true saint of Islam. (The concept of sainthood in Islam is developed only in Sufism. The word "saint" derives from the Arabic *wali* which means "a friend of God," implying the mental closeness with the divine which some Sufis experienced through their spiritual exercise).

Rabi'a's life has been told far and wide in the Islamic world, and her fame has earned her respect among the most prominent Sufi thinkers and writers. One of them, Farid al-Din Attar, says the following about Rabi'a in his allegorical poem *The Conference of the Birds*:

No she was not a single woman  
But a hundred men over:  
Robed in the quintessence of  
pain  
From foot to face, immersed in  
Truth  
Effaced in the radiance of god

And liberated from all superfluous excess. (159–161)

To honour Rabi'a's merit in piety, self-denial, and love of God, later Sufi masters attached a title of "The Crown of Men" to her name, exalting her above any male Sufis of previous generations. Having become an orphan at an early age, Rabi'a was sold into slavery so that she suffered throughout her youth. Though later freed, her youth as a slave girl left a profound impact on her philosophy of life. Loneliness led her to God, and the lack of emotional support made God her only love. Love for God became her "taste," i.e., the most salient feature of her asceticism. Indeed, she is credited with having injected early Sufi expressions with a powerful dose of emotionalism.

Love of God overwhelmed Rabi'a's being and became the sole driving force of her existence. To the dismay of a number of people who cared for her and a number of men who offered her marriage, this love for God was exclusive and absolute. Once she was asked, "Do you love God?" "Yes," she replied. "Are you than an enemy of Satan?" was another question. To this she said: "My love of all-Merciful God leaves me no room for hostility towards Satan" (Smith 123). Another common story associated with her tells that she used to carry a torch in one hand and a jug of water in the other. When finally asked why she was doing it, she replied:

I want to throw fire into Paradise and pour water into Hell so that these two veils disappear, and it becomes clear who worships God out of love, not out of fear of Hell or hope for Paradise. (Smith 123)

Drawing on the Qur'anic verse 5:59 which says "God loves them, and they love God," Rabi'a geared her submission (*islam*) to loving and being loved by God in an absolute way, and her excellence (*ihsan*) to not letting anyone stand between her and the object of her love. On this verse, she meditated as follows:

Love has come from Eternity

and passes into Eternity, and nobody has been found in seventy thousand worlds who drinks one drop of it until at last he is absorbed in God. (Schimmel 40)

Many later Sufi women, following Rabi'a's example in their amorous devotion to God, hoped to achieve the same fusion through love of two seemingly opposite forces: power and submission. While power and submission have remained mutually exclusive in the teaching of the Islamic law, Rabi'a, just as many women who followed her example, succeeded in blending them in a way that offered her a sense of complete spiritual fulfillment. Islamic law teaches that a servant of God, the one who submits, consciously recognizes his/her own impotence before the omnipotent God. The familiar phrase used by most Muslims in daily conversation, *inshallah*—"if God wills"—is psychologically a powerful reminder that nothing is in one's hands, unless God wills so. Furthermore, the confirmation of submissiveness by a ritual touching of ground with one's forehead during the prayer embodies this sense of unconditional dependence on God's might.

In Rabi'a's case, love—her personalized manner of submission—is defined as a two-way street. She sees love as a continuous energy that flows

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from God to his creatures and from his creatures back to God. The cycle is the main driving force of all existence, and without it, the world would be no more. As long as God will love one, one will exist. If he ever stops, one will perish. Yet in order to be absorbed by the full force of the divine love, one must unconditionally and exclusively love God. Only in

this reciprocal loving can one truly feel what submission means, but also what divine might means. The Sufi quest of annihilation of the human self in the divine self is thus conceived by Rabi'a as the annihilation of human love in the perfect divine love.

I have loved you with two loves  
a selfish love and love that is  
worthy of You.

As for the selfish love, I occupy  
myself  
therein with remembrance of  
You to the exclusion of all  
others

As for that which is worthy of  
You

therein You raise the veil that I  
may see You

Yet there is no praise to me in  
this or that

Because all praise is with You.  
(Nurbaksh 74)

Thus, unlike another major Sufi of the time, al-Hallaj, who, in the moment of self-annihilation with God's essence, exclaimed: "I am with Truth!" a phrase that horrified ordinary Muslims and led to his punishment by death for espousing *shirk* (idolatry), Rabi'a, aware of the power of spiritual submission, humbly created a distance between her self and the divine self. So even though the self-annihilation was the final goal, Rabi'a and her followers consciously fell short of achieving it, preferring instead a continuous yearning that could never come to an end. A late ninth-century Sufi woman, Umm Ayman, explains:

Since my ultimate return is to  
You, how should I not always  
aspire to be with You? As I never  
saw any good from other than  
You, how should I not love You?  
Since it is you who have set year-  
ning with me, How should I not  
yearn for You. (Nurbaksh 90)

The process, then, is never to be completed, even though its aim is clearly defined. But achieving the aim in explicit terms would mean repeat-

ing al-Hallaj's trap of self-glorification and overcoming the necessary submission. Without spiritual submission there is no spiritual strength. Without spiritual strength, there is no awareness of God's glory. Thus, Rabi'a and her followers consciously created a meditative paradox, so as to insure that the tension between power and weakness, between submission and excellence, never subside and so did not cause self-destruction before the deserved self-annihilation. So whether wives, mothers, or ascetics, Sufi women opted to nurture spiritual strength with submissiveness, and submissiveness with strength. A Sufi woman of the late nine century aptly illustrated the reasons for keeping the tension alive:

Do not wonder at those [men]  
slain

In the dust at the Beloved's door  
Marvel rather at those [women]  
who can survive  
with their soul intact when open-  
ing the door.

(Nurbaksh 116)

*This paper was presented at the Centre for Feminist Research's "Conference on Female Spirituality: A Celebration of Worshipers, Goddesses, Priestesses, and Female Saints," held at York University in March 1996. Funding assistance from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for the presentation and publication of this paper is gratefully acknowledged.*

*Amila Buturovic is an Assistant Professor of Islam at the Division of Humanities, York University.*

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## LYN LIFSHIN

### When I Still Rode Horses

I couldn't see I  
was fat and wouldn't  
be asked to dance.  
By the time leaves  
went blood, before  
frost bloomed in  
the grey barnwood,  
doors, and the horses'  
breath on skin  
warmed like breath  
of another body  
too close not to be  
part of my own. I  
felt blood pulse  
before I felt my  
own juice spilling  
onto pale cotton,  
or could imagine  
straddling a shape  
like and not like  
my own. It was as  
if something in  
me was pressed so  
into me I could  
feel the Morse  
code warning,  
"escape," was  
sucked into some  
thing bigger than  
I was by flesh that  
like my mother's  
belly was a scout  
sent out ahead,  
letting me know

*Lyn Lifshin's poetry appears earlier in this volume.*