

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 37

Gender and Performance in Sufi Movement III

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, we are discussing gender and performance in Sufi movement. The Sufis, like we see, are basically principally associated with service to the people. It is a service-based order and in the recent years we see that with gender activism, Sufism is also fighting the case of women. Sufism is wanting to bring in... so Sufism is.. we see that in the recent years Sufism is more concerned with gender activism too. It is trying to bring up the overall status of the females within the Sufi order, render more visibility to the females.

In some cases this has engendered recasting of the role of the Muslim male as the socially enlightened, who is more sensitive and responsive to the social ills that have kept women on the socio-economic margins for a long time. So we see that Sufism has recently tied the question of social progress, of men's enlightenment, of men's being you know truly male, with their sensitivity and responsiveness vis-a-vis the question of women's development, women's you know empowerment and upliftment. So in other cases, however, Islamic masculinities are projected in the social and political arenas through you know, ways that have less to do with the vision of Islam as a moral and spiritual force and more to do with the pursuit of a patriarchal order, a patriarchal power structure in the name of, in the name of the prophet, through militarization of the state, engagement of ideologically rigid representations of the faith, and this is spearheaded by a priestly figure, the figure of the ulema and the use of violence to suppress the feminized expression of Islam. And this is something that scholar Durre Ahmed is arguing as the case of Pakistan today.

So with too much of emphasis on militarization, on you know ideological rigidity and demonstration of you know power and domination, the aims of Islam based on moral and

spiritual force and development have taken a back seat, they have been sidelined, right. The concept of public good, the charitable ideas, the softer power of Islam have been, you know, put aside. So Saad Ali Khan and Abida Bano's research paper 'Women and Sufism in South Asia: A Survey of Historical Trends' suggests that according to historical evidence, women and men have been considered as equal in the path of Tasavvuf or Sufism. However, the hagiographical silence that we see historically about the female practitioners within the Sufi circles in South Asia raises questions and the needs of scholarly intervention in order to address these gaps in the literature. Why have women, the female Sufis been mentioned so less vis-a-vis you know scholarship, Sufi scholarship? Nizamuddin Auliya, also called the Mehboob-e-Ilahi, he was a 13th century Sufi and is reported as saying the following:

So Nizamuddin Auliya says, I quote, "when the lion comes out of the forest, nobody asks whether it is a male or a female. The progeny of Adam should aspire to piety and sanctity whether they are men or women", unquote. So Auliya's saying is recorded in Akhbar al-Akhyar fi Asrar al-Abrar, which is a compendium by Muhaddis Dihlawi in the context of the Sufi women from South Asia. So this work Akhbar al-Akhyar is considered as one of the best tabaqat or Sufi literature produced in South Asia. The history of Sufism in South Asia has been well-documented by different scholars.

As historian Alexander Knysh conceptualizes, many scholars have produced significant studies that explore, describe and analyze Sufism's history in South Asia. One of the most often cited female Sufi saint is Rabia al-Adwaiyya and most of the debates and much of the literature on Sufi women are focused on the figure of Rabia al-Adwaiyya. Historically, we see that Sufism is also known as the pre-institutional phase or the pre-Tariqa Sufism, where no formal silsilas or schools actually existed. This formative period of Sufism was attributed to the ideas and practices of the Sufis from the contemporary times. Now Rabia al-Adwaiyya as a Sufi woman therefore becomes an archetype for the rest of the individuals, especially the women from her times.

She has been attributed as the first Sufi that introduced the concept of unconditional love for the divine, not loving the God out of the desire for Jannat or some selfish motive or intention, but a selfless love that does not want anything back really. This is a concept that she had formulated during her time, which is a radical shift in Sufi thought and practice that has, you know, that has subsequently inspired many generations of Sufis after her. The fact that women have always participated and remained a part of the South Asian Sufism or Tasavvuf has now been accepted and it is still being contested to some

extent. However, some scholars do maintain that Sufism not only offer more space to women, but is in general more accommodative. We have been talking about this inclusive nature of Sufism, where it opens its arms to other religions and it learns from others, it teaches and learns from others.

It is basically a very fluctuating order, right. It is not known for any kind of fixity or rigidity in terms of practices and thoughts. Some scholars have even compared and contrasted Sufism with Islam. So, they have sometimes become so binary that they have been contrasted. The puritanical Islam on the one hand, the puritanical Islam on the one hand and Sufism on the other and they have argued that Sufism is more egalitarian in terms of gender sensitivity and has upheld, traditionally upheld and dealt with the women's questions, the question of the female, female participant.

The presence of women and their participation within Sufism in practice is more complex and it requires historicization and contextual understanding. Sharify-Funk mentions that, you know, considering the status of women within Sufi and Muslim contexts is not simply a matter of marginalization or empowerment, but is far more nuanced. So, we cannot understand women's position in dyadic terms - either they are completely marginalized or completely empowered. The case with the women within the, you know, Sufi and Muslim context is more nuanced, as women negotiate and occupy a spectrum of the sphere in their enactment of Sufi traditions.

So, similarly another scholar, Sadia Shaikh argues that Sufism neither presents a monolithic position on gender nor a.. what she calls as a historical panacea for all things beneficial for women. So, it is not completely a black or a white, I mean it is not completely or entirely a picture of positivity, nor that of, you know, hopelessness. So, reflecting upon the role and position of women within Muslim societies, Annemarie Schimmel observes an overall decline rather than deterioration in the situation. However, she maintains that women continue to play a remarkable role in Sufism within the Muslim world or Muslim context. So, Rabia al-Adwaiyya has been recognized as the first Sufi, you know, female Sufi saint who introduced the concept of unconditional love for God.

The history reveals that she was known for her piety and her love for the divine and her gnosis of the path, her knowledge of the path. She used to give public sermons on the

mysteries of the Sufi path and in fact there have.. in fact there have been many male Sufis from her time who benefited from her discourses. So, she has also, in a way, held the position of the Murshid. She has enjoyed that kind of a status being a female from her time. Her anecdotal interactions with great Sufi Hassan Basri, so Hasan al-Basri and Rabia al-Adwaiyya's interactions or conversations mark interesting development within Sufism's history.

So, we see that contrary to the common assumption, women's roles within Sufism have not been limited to their social roles of being just, you know, mothers, wives, sisters and daughters within the space of domesticity. During the medieval period of Sufism, many Sufi women were also recognized as teachers of their times. So, Ibn Arabi, who is also known among the Sufis as Shaykh-e-Akbar or the Grand Sheikh, shared his own spiritual teaching experience with two of the Sufi women. He regarded both these Sufi women with high respect and considered them as her mentors, his teachers. So, the fact that two females could be the Murshid of a great saint, as far as I know, prominent as Ibn Arabi.

So, here we see that some prominence, some, some, you know, space is definitely occupied by the female Sufi practitioners. They are not invisible in the medieval period. For scholars such as Carl Ernst, women's presence and participation within the Sufi order points to a change, an overall change in global Sufism, even a new beginning.. what Ernst would call as the feminist interpretations of Sufism. So, for scholars like Pemberton, Sufism has undergone what Pemberton would call as structural and symbolic changes, something that fundamentally paved the path for more female practitioners to participate within the global contemporary Sufism. So, Pemberton notes that inclusivity and progressive-mindedness positively impacted the social world and brought more women within the realm of Sufi activity or the Sufi metaphysics.

Scholars termed the trend of less documentation on women and especially Sufi women in Sufi literature from South Asia as veiling or as silencing of women in general. So, although there have been noted female practitioners within Sufi circles, scholarship focusing on, you know, these Sufi women is sparse. We see that there is very few, there are very few documentations on the female participants and thereby very few... sparse Sufi literature from South Asia that talk about these women. There is a veiling or silencing in general and other scholars would note that this is related to the Islamic society's, you know, culture that prevents discussion related to women in general. So, we see that this observation is not peculiar to the Saudi Sufi orders only, but can be also, you know, traced and analyzed in different parts of the world.

One glaring example would be the work of Rkia Cornel, which aims at revealing the hagiographical silence, what Cornel calls as a hagiographical silence as observed through Al-Sulami's work. So, analyzing the historical context, so analyzing or drawing on this historical fact and context, Ernst concludes that subtle misogyny exists in the Sufi texts. So, despite being so liberal in terms of aims and ambitions, misogynist texts and tendencies cannot be entirely denied and shunned. One could hardly find a detailed description and analysis of Sufi women's lives within many Sufi literature and works, the existent works. Even if certain forms of literature do focus on the women, it almost obscures the reality of the women, so the person concerned; may be due to this, you know, gender-based censorship, the female's name, original name or real name would not be given, it would be expunged. So, while many compendiums about Sufi men can be traced, there are hardly, you know, many works that mention the women therein. So, for instance, Sufism's first Persian work in South Asia by Ali Usman Hajvari, also known as Data Gunj Bukhsh's work is known as *Kahsf ul Mahjoob*, and it has detailed discussions on Sufis from South Asia, but hardly discusses even one woman as a Sufi emerging from the region. Similarly, there are other manuals and compendiums that discuss Sufis, but very few have talked about the women's role, the women's position in Sufi orders. So, Carl Ernst would note that in most cases, women's biographies make a part of an appendix to men's biographies, right.

So, women's biographies are like an afterthought, an appendage, an addition to the main discussion, which is the men's biographies. And so, the women's biographies occupy just a marginal, you know, marginal discussion vis-a-vis the main subject of the book focusing on the men. Similarly, we see that scholar R. Pande is highlighting the silencing of women in statist historiographical tradition. According to Pande, I quote, "In the Indian context the literary elite were Brahmans, writing in Sanskrit, and later the Maulvis writing in Persian — both articulating a point of view that was not representing women", unquote.

So, just like we said, all these works would mainly focus on the men as the chief subject, the chief focus in the work, whereas women's discussion would lie somewhere at the margins as an appendage, as an afterthought. So, most of the historiographies, biographies and other forms of Sufi literature in South Asia document the Sufi men explicitly and very vividly, whereas they veil the subject of the women and their role within the Sufi circles. However, having said that, a few Sufis have transcended this norm, you know, existing in their times and they have, they did incorporate some Sufi

women, they mentioned some Sufi women in their works on Sufism. Among such exceptional or few instances is the work of Abd al-Haqq Muhaddith. So, Abd al-Haqq Muhaddith's Reports of the Righteous on the Secrets of the Pious is worth mentioning.

So, Muhaddith has included descriptions of women who were associated with the Chishti Sufi order. Bibi Sarah and Bibi Fatima's lives have been described in some details. Even the historians of the later times included a few entries on the Sufi women in their works. So, Syed Athar Abbas Rizvi's work on the Sufi's order, which is a very important part of the Sufism... So, Syed Athar Abbas Rizvi's work on Sufism in South Asia mentions female Sufis from the region as an annexure to the main work.

And Rizvi would argue, stating that (I quote from the book): "we have mentioned here only the most outstanding female Sufis amongst those whose lives have been documented however the biographies of a large number of saintly women remain unknown" (1978: 405). So, this is evident from the historical sources that women in general and Sufi women in particular have found very little space in Sufi literature from their times. The lack of documentation can be attributed to a number of issues pertaining to this context. So, for instance, veiling or purda could be a chief reason.

Purda for the Muslim women can be considered as a relevant factor that contributes to the erasure, right, an eventual erasure of women from history, from the documentation of, you know, Sufi literature, erasure or invisibilization of the women from the Sufi cosmos. Similarly, it also points out how the Sufis, referring to the Sufi males, would treat the women especially within their Sufi orders. However, this issue also needs to be contextualized and understood with reference to the time and space that we are talking about, the medieval time and space, right. Since many scholars and historians are now digging deeper into the history in order to explore the connections, one could expect that the complexity of the issue will be disinterred, you know, through some rare evidences where we also find mention and even contribution by the female Sufi practitioners. So, according to Giuseppe Scattolin, according to Giuseppe Scattolin, the Sufi women remained historically a part of Sufism.

So, there are two things that we simultaneously find here. One is that the women have been a part of these orders time immemorially since their provenance, the figure of Rabia being a prominent, you know, a strong evidence to this point and yet documentation

about the women has been very sparse due to certain, you know, stringent social rules and conventions. So, this once again takes us back to the fact that, you know, all religious orders, all religions that try to discipline a people, a civilization and humanity are, you know, principally man-made orders, they are man-made social system, social apparatuses and the histories of religion can hardly become her stories of religion. From the religious discourses, discourses and discussions on religion, women have forever been absent and hardly can a woman, a female figure be seen as a preceptor or a leader. So, on this note, I am going to stop my lecture here today and let us meet again with another round of discussions in the next lecture. Thank you. Thank you.