

SUFISM STUDIES FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE: THE ROLE AND EXPERIENCE OF RABIAH AL-ADAWIYAH IN THE SUFI TRADITION

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Abstract: This study explores the role and experiences of Rabbiah al-Adawiyah in the Sufi tradition with a focus on gender perspectives. Rabbiah, as one of the central figures in the history of Sufism, is known for her significant contribution to the development of Sufism teachings, especially in the concept of divine love (*mahabbah*) and spiritual asceticism. This study uses a qualitative approach with a type of literature study to explore the poetry of a prominent Sufi woman, Rabbiah al-Adawiyah, to understand how they responded to and shaped their views on spirituality in a context that is often dominated by male narratives. The research findings demonstrate that Rabbiah not only enriched Sufi theology with a feminine perspective but also challenged gender stereotypes in Islamic spirituality. Rabbiah al-Adawiyah emerges not only as an inspirational Sufi figure but also as a crucial symbol of women's spiritual potential within the Sufi tradition. Her contributions have left a profound spiritual legacy and continue to inspire contemporary discussions on equality and inclusivity in Islamic religious practice.

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Introduction

The concept of gender has a more spiritual dimension compared to the social or biological approaches often encounter in contemporary gender studies. The understanding of the term "gender" itself is highly diverse, as there remains no consensus on its definition. Etymologically, the word "gender" originates from the English term meaning sex (Saumantri, 2022). Puspitawati, as cited in Nuraini et al. (2022), elaborates that gender refers to the distinctions between men and women in roles, functions, and behaviors influenced by social values, culture, or habits.

Sufism, or tasawwuf, is a branch of Islamic studies focusing on deep spiritual and mystical aspects of the Islamic tradition. It emphasizes cultivating a close and profound relationship with God through inner development, spiritual practices, and unwavering devotion (Mustofa, 2019). In addition to its profound teachings, Sufism encompasses diverse experiences and contributions from practitioners, including women.

Historical narratives often overlook the roles and experiences of women in the Sufi tradition due to patriarchal perspectives. The absence of female Sufi figures in these accounts is attributed to cultural perceptions that minimize the importance of women (Fadil & Alawi, 2023). However, history demonstrates the presence of influential Sufi women who have significantly contributed to the development and dissemination of Sufi teachings (Sumanta, 2021). Women like Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah, a mystic from the 8th century, illustrate that they are not only passive followers but also spiritual leaders with deep theological insights. In Sufism, women often serve as teachers, poets, and leaders within spiritual communities. They participate in diverse ritual practices and undergo profound mystical experiences, sometimes distinct from those of Sufi men. Studying women's roles in Sufism is crucial not only to acknowledge their contributions but also to understand how gender influences spiritual experiences and religious expressions in Islam.

In the realm of women in Sufism, numerous studies have delved into the subject. For instance, Faesol (2021) explains that gender construction in Sufism emphasizes spiritual and psychological aspects of individuals rather than conventional gender roles or characteristics. This concept highlights the development of awareness

and integration of feminine and masculine aspects within one's soul to achieve spiritual perfection. Similarly, Anshori (2015) further explains that Sufism's central teachings revolve around achieving closeness to Allah and His love through purity of heart and soul. In this pursuit, there are no gender-specific requirements; everyone has equal opportunities. Upon reaching makrifah, all individuals are regarded equally, blurring distinctions between male and female sufis (Hayuningtyas et al., 2022). This research endeavors to examine the role of women in Sufism, focusing on Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah, and explores the unique spiritual and mystical experiences she encountered within the Sufi tradition.

This study adopts a qualitative approach (Moleong, 2017), employing library research to explore the roles and experiences of women in the Sufi tradition from a gender perspective. The literature review method involves a systematic approach to collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing information from various relevant written sources (Sugiarti et al., 2020). Data collection utilizes documentation (Sugiono, 2019), sourced from both primary and secondary materials. Primary data includes classic Sufi texts that document the experiences and teachings of Sufi women. Secondary sources comprise books, journal articles, dissertations, and research reports discussing women's roles in Sufism. Content analysis is employed to analyze the collected data (Sarosa, 2021).

Biografi Rabi'ah Al-Adawiyah

Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah, also known as Rabi'ah al-Basri, is one of the most famous female mystics in Islamic history. Rabi'ah's full name is Rabi'ah bint Ismail Al-Adawiyah Al-Bashriyah Al-Qaisiyah. Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah was given the title *Ummu al-Khair* (Hermawan et al., 2021), as well as the mother of the grand masters (Wasalmi, 2014), and *Syabidatul 'Iyqil Ilahi* (the woman who was martyred by divine longing) (Nafi, 2022). She was born around 717 AD in a village near the city of Basra, Iraq (Anwar, 2010). Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah was born as the fourth daughter of a very poor family. Hence her family gave her the name Rabi'ah, which means fourth child. The name "al-Adawiyah" comes from the Adi tribe, the tribe her family came from. Although she came from a very poor family, Rabi'ah would one day become an honorable human being, as Rasulullah conveyed in her father's dream (Attar, 2018). Her father dreamed of the Prophet when

Rabi'ah was still in the womb, therefore Rabi'ah's birth brought blessings (Faza, 2022).

Rabi'ah grew up in a religious family environment full of zuhudan. Since childhood, Rabi'ah showed signs of extraordinary intelligence and piety. In everyday life, little Rabi'ah always noticed her father's attitude when he was worshipping God. Since then Rabi'ah began to imitate her father to worship God. Little Rabi'ah has been able to distinguish which is halal and which is haram, which is good and which is bad. From a young age, Rabi'ah has also seen the attitude of wisdom in herself, unpretentious, polite and has a strong memory. Rabi'ah memorized the Quran from the age of ten (Semait, 1993).

After the death of her parents, Rabi'ah was sold into slavery. During her slavery period, she was known by her master as a very devout servant and had deep piety. According to several sources (Hermawan et al., 2021), (Abi, 2020), (Thabrani & Hamdy, 2019), one night, her master saw a light shining from Rabi'ah's head as she prayed. Inspired by her piety and spirituality, her employer then freed Rabi'ah.

After her release, Rabi'ah chose to live as an ascetic, dedicating herself entirely to worship and devotion to Allah. She was known to spend much time in prayer and meditation. Rabi'ah developed a teaching on divine love (*mahabbah*), which emphasizes that love for God must be sincere and pure, without expecting the rewards of heaven or fearing hell (Nata, 2011). This teaching became one of the main foundations in the development of Sufism.

Rabi'ah teachings were very influential in the development of Sufism. She emphasized the importance of pure love for God above any form of fear or hope. Rabi'ah articulated that worship should arise from a genuine love for God, rather than from a desire for paradise or fear of hell (Wasalmi, 2014). One of her renowned poems encapsulates these teachings:

"O Allah, if I worship You for fear of hell, burn me in hell; and if I worship You in hope of heaven, keep me away from it. But if I worship You for Your sake alone, Grudge me not Your everlasting Beauty."

Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah is one of the most influential female figures in the history of Sufism. Her life and her teachings on divine love have inspired many subsequent Sufi figures, both male and

female. Rabi'ah is also known through various stories and anecdotes that emphasize her piety, wisdom, and prudence. Although she did not leave much writing of her own, her teachings were transmitted by her disciples and recorded in various Sufi literatures (Mustamin, 2020). One of the best-known authors to record Rabi'ah's story and teachings is Fariduddin Attar in his work "*Tadzki'ratul al-Auliya: the miraculous and wisdom-laden stories of the saints of God*" (Memoirs of the Saints).

Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah died around 801 AD in Basrah (Mustofa, 2019). Despite her life of simplicity and rejection of the material world, her influence in the world of Sufism and Islamic spirituality continues to live and thrive. To this day, Rabi'ah is revered as one of the great saints of the Sufi tradition, and many people continue to remember and study her teachings.

The Role of Rabi'ah Al-Adawiyah in the Sufi Tradition

Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah, also known as Rabi'ah al-Basri, stands as one of the most influential female figures in the Sufi tradition. Her life and teachings have profoundly shaped the development of Sufism, particularly in terms of the concepts of divine love and sincere devotion to God. The following outlines Rabi'ah's primary roles within the Sufi tradition:

First, she pioneered the Concept of Divine Love (*Mahabbah*). *Mahabbah* in Sufism denotes a profound and selfless love for God. Within this tradition, mahabbah emphasizes the deep emotional and spiritual bond between the individual and God, wherein love for God becomes the supreme objective and primary motivation in one's spiritual journey (Nata, 2011). Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah is renowned for her teachings on sincere and selfless divine love. She introduced the notion that love for God should be pure, free from the fear of punishment or the hope of reward. According to her perspective, divine love transcends selfish desires, leading to complete devotion and the dissolution of the ego.

Rabi'ah is often portrayed in Sufi stories as someone who reached such a profound level of divine love that her entire life was dedicated to loving God. Her poems and prayers describe her boundless love for God, such as: "I love You with two loves, love for myself and love for Yourself, love for myself is the state of constantly

remembering You, love for Yourself is the state of revealing the veil until You can be seen" (Abi, 2020).

Second, she serves as a model of piety and devotion. Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah exemplified exceptional piety and devotion within Sufism. Throughout her life, she demonstrated that love for God can serve as a profound basis for achieving genuine piety and selfless dedication. Her call to love God with all one's heart and soul, and to completely devote oneself to Him, remains pertinent and inspiring even in contemporary times.

As an influential female Sufi, she taught that true piety comes from pure love of God. Rabi'ah demonstrated that worship and prayer should be done not out of fear of punishment or expectation of reward, but out of love and a desire to draw closer to God. Rabi'ah's devotion to God was based on selfless love. She did not expect anything in return from God apart from His presence (Maimun, 2004). This forms the basis for many Sufi practices that emphasize genuine devotion as the primary path to God.

Third, Rabi'ah is regarded as a spiritual leader for women. Love (*mahabbah*) for God represents the ultimate spiritual goal, occupying a lofty position among the spiritual stages (*maqamat*). Practices such as repentance (*taubah*) and asceticism (*zuhud*), among others, ultimately culminate in *mahabbatullah*, or divine love. Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah achieved the pinnacle of this spiritual station (*mahabbatullah*). Her love was spiritual and pure, devoid of worldly desires (Affan, 2008).

Rabi'ah played a significant role in demonstrating that women could be esteemed and respected as spiritual leaders. Her profound influence within the Sufi community garnered respect from numerous male Sufi figures of her time. Rabi'ah's presence as a revered Sufi woman helped open doors for other women to participate in the spiritual and mystical traditions of Islam, highlighting that spiritual leadership is not confined by gender.

Fourth, she inspired Sufi literature and poetry. Women in Sufism not only serve as pivotal spiritual leaders but also offer profound inspiration in the realm of Sufi literature and poetry. Through their words, they articulate mystical experiences, wisdom, and profound divine love. The inspiration they impart continues to resonate with many people today, enriching the Sufi literary tradition and providing deeper understanding of the spiritual path within Sufism..

Rabi'ah is not only known through her teachings, but also through her beautiful and profound mystical poems. These poems reflect her sincere love for God and her selfless devotion. His works have inspired many Sufis and poets after him, enriching the tradition of Sufi literature (Abi, 2020).

Fifth, Rabi'ah's philosophical impact on Sufi thought has been profound. Her teachings on divine love and devotion have profoundly shaped Sufi philosophy overall. She emphasized that the spiritual journey is essentially a journey of love, requiring Sufis to transcend the ego and worldly desires to achieve closeness to God. Her teachings have provided the foundation for numerous theories and practices within Sufism (Emawati, 2017).

Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah played a pivotal role in the Sufi tradition by pioneering the concept of genuine and selfless divine love. Her life and teachings served as a source of inspiration for numerous Sufis, regardless of gender, leaving an indelible mark on the world of Sufism. Through her unwavering devotion to God, Rabi'ah exemplified that authentic spirituality transcends gender distinctions, and that every person possesses the capacity to draw near to God through heartfelt love and dedication.

Rabi'ah Al-Adawiyah's Experience in the Sufi Tradition

Although the record of Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah's personal experiences in the Sufi tradition may not be as complete as we might expect, there are some concepts and mystical experiences associated with her that are known through her story and teachings. Here are some aspects of Rabi'ah's experience in Sufi tradition:

First, the mystical experience of divine love. Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah had profound mystical experiences in the quest for divine love. These experiences included moments where she felt God's presence directly through prayer, meditation and deep devotion. For Rabi'ah, love of God is the center of her spiritual experience, and this experience has given her satisfaction and happiness that far surpasses worldly happiness (Sulaeman, 2020).

Second, the experience of enlightenment and oneness with God. In the Sufi tradition, the experience of enlightenment or oneness with God is often considered the culmination of the spiritual journey. Rabi'ah had reached a high level of consciousness where she felt herself united with God directly. I have become one with Him. As

she sings "My existence has ceased and my identity has vanished" (Attar, 2018) This experience transcends the limits of ordinary human thought and perception, and leads her to a deeper understanding of the nature of existence and divine love (Hermawan et al., 2021).

Third, Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah was known for her profoundly simple and ascetic lifestyle, renouncing worldly possessions to focus on sincere worship and devotion to God. She famously queried, "When I ask creatures about their Creator, I blush; how can I ask about what is not His?" (Abi, 2020). Through her asceticism, Rabi'ah deepened her closeness to God and prioritized spiritual needs over worldly desires.

Fourth, the experience of sacrifice and acceptance of God's will: As a Sufi mystic, Rabi'ah embraced profound sacrifices in her pursuit of divine love. This involved sacrificing her own desires, worldly attachments, and wholeheartedly surrendering to God's will. Through these experiences, Rabi'ah attained a level of consciousness where she lived solely for God's sake, as expressed in her poem:

"I have forsaken everything I love,
Choosing You as my only aim.
In every heartbeat, I hear Your name,
Every breath is a prayer for You.
Even if I were to live a thousand years,
I would surrender my life only to You.
For You are the ultimate goal of my quest,
And only in sacrificing for You do I find peace." (Abi, 2020).

Additionally, she expressed her acceptance of God's will in another poem:

"O God, in every test and tribulation,
I perceive Your loving hand.
In pain and suffering, I discover Your encompassing love.
I accept all that You bestow upon me,
Both joy and sorrow,
For within every decree of Yours lies boundless wisdom." (Abi, 2020).

Conclusion

The study of Sufism from a gender perspective reveals that women play significant roles and profound experiences within the

Sufi tradition, despite often receive less attention in the dominant historical narrative. Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah, a central figure in Sufism, left a lasting spiritual legacy that continues to shape Sufi thought and practice to this day. Through her life and teachings, Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah demonstrated that women possess immense to attain the same spiritual depth as men in the Sufi tradition. Her contributions not only enhance our understanding of Sufism, but also affirm the importance of divine love and sacrifice in the spiritual journey.

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