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# ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK ON SUFISM

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## NARRATIVIZING EARLY MYSTIC AND SUFI WOMEN\*

Mechanisms of gendering in Sufi hagiographies

Sara Abdel-Latif

### Introduction

Both scholars and practitioners of Sufism have attributed gender egalitarian impulses to the Sufi tradition.<sup>1</sup> They point to Sufism as an early proponent of women's access to knowledge and authority, contrasting it with other streams of Islamic thought and practice that have historically resisted female leadership. However, a closer reading of early Sufi writings reveals male authors held conflicting and often highly anti-egalitarian stances regarding the place of their female contemporaries in the social hierarchy, even while some portray women favorably in their work. In fact, male authors gendered their writings such that womanhood/effeminacy was equated with inferiority. Here, I offer a literary analysis of male-authored depictions of early mystic and Sufi women, male youths, slaves and black individuals to further understandings of gendered dynamics in Sufi thought.<sup>2</sup> I investigate specifically how 'Abd al-Karīm b. Hawāzin Qushayrī (d. 1072) frequently reduced pious and ascetic women, male youths, slaves and black individuals to one-dimensional trickster-types rather than portraying them as fellow aspirants on the Sufi path. Through a comparative investigation of depictions of other marginalized members of classical Islamicate societies in Qushayrī's *Risāla* (Epistle on Sufism), I demonstrate how the gendering of female mystics and other members of the non-elite acts as a marker of difference from the default elite male norm. These markers of difference serve as a narrative tool in the hands of male authors to reinforce and perpetuate patriarchal social hierarchy and, therefore, obscure significant aspects of lived social history. Whether it be gender, skin color, social class, age, non-Arab origin or non-Muslim status, any marker of difference from the free male elite functions as a literary ploy that diminishes those on the margins while upholding social patriarchy. We thus further understandings of gendered social dynamics in eleventh-century Islamicate societies by investigating all who did not hold a dominant position, whether socially or sexually, and how they are rendered effeminate and inferior in the writings of free, elite men who held hegemonic power.

Elite Muslim men regularly utilized gender as a language through which to explore relationships of power and dominance on every level of society. To illustrate the subtle mechanisms male authors employed to gender Sufi narrative, I first analyze depictions of mystic women, then young men who served older men as sexual partners (beardless youths),

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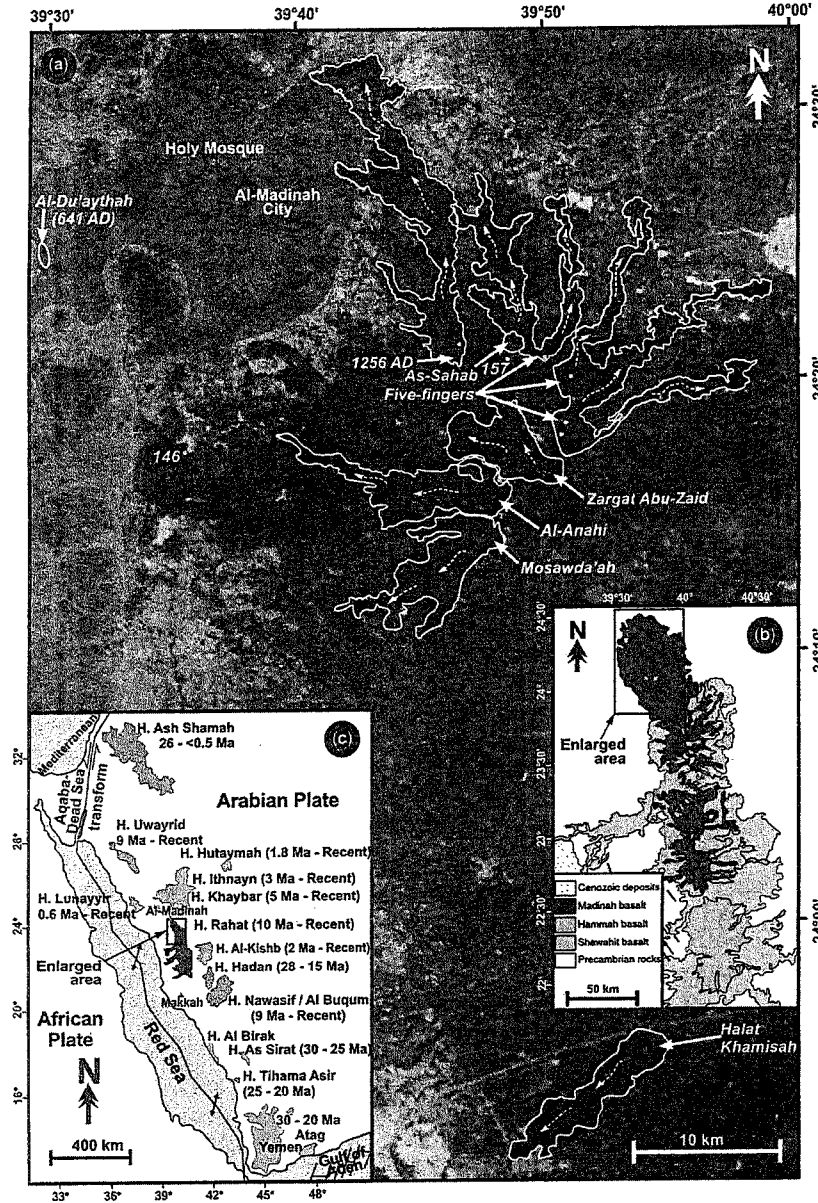
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## Memlük Sultanı Şecerüddür ve Kadınların Yöneticiliğine Dair Hadis

Hicri 7. ve 8. asırda, İslam tarihi açısından etki olarak Haçlı saldırıları ve Moğol işgali ile kıyaslanamayacak ancak belli tartışmalar açısından referans kaynağı olan müstesna bazı olaylar da yaşanmıştır. Bunlardan birisi de Şecerüddür'ün (ö. 655/1257) bir süreliğine de olsa sultan oluşudur. Zira bir kadının devlet başkanı olması, İslam tarihinde sık karşılaşılan hatta karşılaşılan bir hadise değildir. Şecerüddür'ün bir süre de olsa yönetici olması günümüzde sosyal ve siyasi olarak kadınların durumu söz konusu olduğunda "olumlu" bir referans olarak kendisine atfı yapılan bir konudur. Bu durumun Hicri 7. asırda nasıl algılandığı ise ayrıca değinilmesi gereken bir meseledir.

Memlükler'in ilk sultanı vasfını haiz olan bu hanım Melike'nin, burada kendisine yer bulması, konu çerçevesinde zikredilen bir rivayet bağlamında olacaktır. Zira onun Memlük Sultanı olmasına ilk itiraz, dönemin halifesinden bir rivayete istinaden gelmiştir. Mezkûr rivayet Buhârî'nin *el-Câmiu's-sahih*'inde şu şekilde yer almıştır:

Yönetim işlerini bir kadına tevdi eden/bir kadını yönetici seçen bir topluluk asla felah bulmayacaktır.<sup>640</sup>

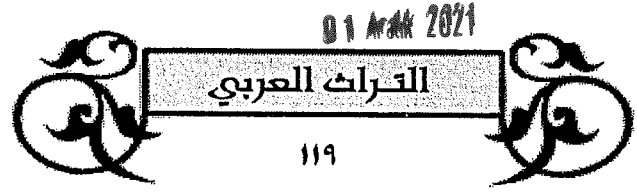
Şecerüddür, Memlükler'e sultan olunca Müsta'sım-Billâh'tan (ö. 656/1258) onun sultanlığını teyit için menşur istenmiştir. Fakat halife, bir kadının sultan olmasını onaylamamıştır. Bu arada onun sultanlığına karşı içte de birçok isyan ve itiraz yaşanmıştır.<sup>641</sup> Hali-

640 Buhârî, "Meğâzî", 83.

641 Cengiz Tomar, "Şecerüddür", *DİA*, XXXVIII, 404.



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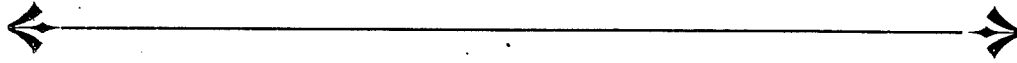
## تغليب المذكر على المؤنث في الخطاب القرآني

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دراسة نحوية تفسيرية في شبهة تمييز الرجل على المرأة

د. محمد أبو زيد أبو زيد (\*)



### المقدمة:

يدرس هذا البحث من خلال منهج وصفي تحليلي، علما من علوم القرآن، وفنا من فنون بلاغته، ألا وهو التغليب. والذي يتناوله البحث على وجه التحديد من هذا الفن هو: تغليب المذكر على المؤنث. من جانبه النظري والتطبيقي.

### المبحث الأول: الجانب النظري

#### تمهيد:

أطلعنا سبحانه بخبر من غيبه، على أمر ما كان لنا لنعرفه بعلومنا الوضعية، واجتهاداتنا العقلية، إنه خلق البشرية من نفس واحدة، بعد أن خلق سبحانه منها زوجها، فقال في محكم كتابه: ﴿هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَجَعَلَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا لِيَسْكُنَ إِلَيْهَا﴾ [سورة الأعراف: 189]. وإنما الذي وعيناه بعلومنا ما تلا مرحلة النفس الواحدة، وهو خلق الإنسان من الذكر والأنثى، وقد أطبقت الأديان السماوية على ما جاء في هذه الآية. قال القرطبي: قال

(\*) أستاذ التفسير وعلوم القرآن المشارك - جامعة تبوك.

*Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and Fatwas of the Dār al-İftā*, 1997; Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "The Ulama and Contestations on Religious Authority," in *Islam and Modernity: Key Issues and Debates*, edited by M. K. Masud et al., 2009; Idem, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, 2002; Malika Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam: Les ulama d'al-Azhar dans l'Égypte contemporaine*, 1995; Madeline C. Zilfi, *The Politics of Piety: The Ottoman Ulema in the Post-Classical Age (1600–1800)*, 1988.

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## Women

Ayesha S. Chaudhry

A look at Muslim historical sources illustrates that the role of gender in Islamic political thought has been varied and complicated. The complex relationship between gender and Islamic political thought will be considered here through a few snapshots: the Qur'an, female contemporaries of Muhammad, medieval Islamic scholarship, and modern Muslim women.

### Women in the Qur'an

Several women are mentioned in the Qur'an, some of whom demonstrate a strong independent spirit. They are held responsible for their own salvation, apart from their husbands or male relatives. The stories of these women trump the patriarchal gender norms of a seventh-century Arabian context in which the Qur'an was purportedly revealed. Such women include Eve (Q. 20:117–23); the wives of Noah, Lot, and Pharaoh (Q. 66:10–12); Sarah, the wife of Abraham (Q. 11:71–73; 51:29–30); Moses's mother (Q. 28:7, 13) and sister (28:10–11); Potiphar's wife (Q. 12:23–32); and Mary, the mother of Jesus (Q. 19). All references to these women are made through their relations to the central male figures in their lives, be they husbands, fathers, sons, or brothers. Mary is the only woman who is mentioned by name in the Qur'an and has a chapter named after her.

The story of the Queen of Sheba is especially noteworthy, since she represents the only positive, nonmonotheistic model of political leadership in the Qur'an (27:15–44). Although the Queen of Sheba is never mentioned by name in the Qur'an, she is identified by her political role as a ruler whose power rivaled that of the prophet and king Solomon. She was the queen of a people called "Saba" (Sheba), a prosperous nation of sun worshipers. All descriptions of the Queen in the Qur'an are salutary; her wisdom and power are highlighted in the story through her pragmatic, diplomatic, and consultative leadership. In the Qur'anic story, the queen's encounter with Solomon occurs in the context of an aggressive unilateral threat delivered by Solomon's avian emissary, named Hudhud. In the missive, Solomon announced the oneness of God and called the queen to submit through Solomon

- “Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of *Tafsīr* in Arabic: A History of the Book Approach,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 12 (2010): 6–40.
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*Islamic Interpretive Tradition and Gender Justice: Processes of Canonization, Subversion, and Change*, edit. Nevin Reda, Yasmin Amin, Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020. s. 173 - 208. **İSAM DN. 287770**

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## Constructing the Image of the Model Muslim Woman

Gender Discourse in

Ibn Sa’d’s *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*

Amira Abou-Taleb

Role models are individuals who provide an example of the kind of success that one may achieve, and often also provide a template of the behaviors that are needed to achieve such success.

Penelope Lockwood, “Someone Like Me Can Be Successful”

The above is a quote from a contemporary psychology study about the impact of female role-modelling. For believing Muslim women, what better aspiration can there be than to emulate women whom God specifically addressed in the Qur’an, as in the case of the wives of the Prophet Muḥammad?<sup>1</sup> They are often referred to as *ummahāt al-mu’minīn* (Mothers of Believers), and their mention in the sacred scripture has contributed to their significance and promoted their function as potential role models. The oldest extant text to provide detailed biographies of these women – and indeed, early Muslim women in general – is *Kitāb al-nisā’* (the Women’s Volume) of the famous *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* (The Great Generations; hereafter *κτκ*) by Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Sa’d (d. 230/845).<sup>2</sup> As Ahmad Nazir Atassi has demonstrated, this book had achieved canonical status by the sixth/ninth century and has since become an “expert witness” on the lives of early Muslims.<sup>3</sup> The type of information Ibn Sa’d emphasized in his portrayal of these women has served

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## Reading the Qur'an through a Gendered, Egalitarian Lens

Revisiting the Concept of *Wilāya* in Q. 9:71

*Asma Afsaruddin*

In roughly the third or fourth year of the Islamic era (corresponding to 625-26 CE), the Medinan woman Companion Umm 'Umāra from the first generation of Muslims remarked to the Prophet Muḥammad in connection with the Qur'anic revelations he had received up to that point, "I see that everything pertains to men; I do not see the mention of women."<sup>1</sup> Umm 'Umāra (Nusayba bint Ka'b al-Anṣāriyya, d. 13/634) was commenting on the fact that Qur'anic verses that had come down so far primarily referred to men and their good deeds and the rewards they were consequently promised in the hereafter. Were women believers not to be recognized as equal participants in this grand unfolding drama of human agency, fulfillment, and salvation? Subsequently, this particular verse was revealed:

Those who have surrendered to God among males and females; those who believe among males and females; those who are sincere among males and females; those who are truthful among males and females; those who are patient among males and females; those who fear God among males and females; those who give in charity among males and females; those who fast among males and females; those who remember God often among males and females – God has prepared for them forgiveness and great reward. (Q. 33:35)<sup>2</sup>

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The Qur'an had settled the question once and for all: women and men had equal moral agency in their quest for the good and righteous life in this world, for which they would reap identical rewards in the afterlife. Gender thus had no role to play in the otherworldly, salvific efficacy offered by the Qur'an through its prescription for a well-ordered moral existence on Earth. Muslim feminist scholars often point to this verse (and others like it) to underscore the gender egalitarianism inherent in the Qur'an.

The question of the Qur'anic ascription of equal moral agency to men and women is further explored in this chapter through a discussion of the exegeses of two additional verses – Q. 9:71 and Q. 4:34 – by select pre-modern and modern male exegetes. These exegeses are contrasted to those generated by Muslim feminist scholars in the modern period, who offer critiques of traditional methodologies of engaging the Qur'an and posit instead a holistic reading of the Qur'an. Such a hermeneutic enterprise allows these women exegetes to develop "alternative" readings of verses that deal specifically with gendered relations and to question the "canonical" status of a body of exegetical literature generated by influential male exegetes. The chapter concludes by offering an analysis of such feminist rereadings of particularly Q. 9:71 and Q. 4:34 and briefly assesses their potential efficacy in challenging the normativity of masculinist interpretations of the Qur'an.

The diachronic nature of this survey helps us plot the exegetical shifts that have occurred over time as conceptions of women's status and roles in society changed in variegated socio-historical circumstances. These sorts of diachronic shifts have not received adequate attention in previous literature. Such an approach is vital, however, for identifying the provenance and historical development of androcentric interpretations that are considered problematic today and thereby allowing such interpretations to be credibly challenged and potentially changed in contemporary contexts. From the perspective of the larger goals of this volume, this diachronic approach furthermore offers a glimpse into the living processes of canonization and decanonization in the past and in the present.

### RETRIEVING GENDER EGALITARIANISM FROM WITHIN THE QUR'AN

Women's readings and perspectives on the Qur'an have not been copiously preserved for us through the centuries. When feminine voices