Sa'diyya Shaikh's Feminist Approach through Her Interpretation of Sufi Thought in Ibn ʿArabi

by Jana Publication & Research

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Abtsract

The discourse on women's rights, feminism, and gender justice within the context of Islam has gained increasing attention, especially as it is brought to the global stage and highlighted in secular European societies. In the wake of post-9/11 Islamophobia, where Muslim women are often portrayed as oppressed figures, there arises a critical need to present alternative narratives that are more just and inclusive in discussions on gender within Islam. This is where figures like Sa'diyya Shaikh, a contemporary Islamic scholar from South Africa, emerge with unique approaches that combine Sufi feminist perspectives and Qur'anic hermeneutics in re-evaluating the roles and status of women in Islam. This article examines the feminist perspectives and methodology promoted by Sa'diyya, particularly through her engagement with the Sufi thought of Ibn ʿArabi in constructing a spiritually-grounded Islamic feminist discourse. This study employs a qualitative design by analyzing her ideas through content analysis of Sa'diyya Shaikh's book, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ʿArabi, Gender and Sexuality*, and other related writings. The findings reveal that Sa'diyya's approach presents an alternative response to the misrepresentation of women's status in Islam as perpetuated by Islamophobic narratives. She draws upon Ibn ʿArabi's arguments regarding the equality of men and women in various aspects of Islamic spirituality, thereby affirming the elevated status of women in Islam.

Keywords: Feminism, Sa'diyya Shaikh, Challenges to Islamic Thought

Introduction

In recent decades, a significant trend has emerged among Muslim women to critically examine and reassess their roles and positions within Islamic societies. This inclination stems from real-life experiences such as gender discrimination, denial of basic rights, and the dominance of patriarchal systems, raising the critical question: Is the perceived marginalization and inferiority of women truly rooted in Islamic teachings, or is it a consequence of culturally and socially patriarchal interpretations? (Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002).This trend has become even more pressing when coupled with external pressures, particularly the global wave of Islamophobia in the modern world. On the global stage, Muslim women especially those who wear the hijab—are frequently used as symbols of oppression within biased and stereotypical Western discourses. Such narratives reinforce the perception that Islam is a religion that restricts women's freedom, thereby diminishing their status in the eyes of the world (Bullock, 2002). This situation calls for a constructive, knowledge-based response to restore the dignity of Muslim women grounded in the true framework of Islam.

ISLAMIC FEMINIST MOVEMENTS

Against the backdrop of the aforementioned historical context, various forms of Islamic feminist movements have emerged to champion gender justice based on Islamic principles. These movements do not replicate Western feminism in its entirety. Instead, they offer contextual approaches grounded in the Qur'an and Sunnah, while critically engaging with interpretive traditions that have marginalized women . Among the key approaches are (Badran, 2009; Mir-Hosseini, 2006):

i.   Textual Feminism

This approach focuses on re-reading the Qur'anic text from a gender perspective. Prominent figures include Amina Wadud (1999), whose work *Qur'an and Woman* revisits verses relating to women to highlight messages of justice and equality. Asma Barlas (2002), in *Believing Women in Islam*, asserts that the Qur'an does not support patriarchy, and that the oppression of women stems from erroneous interpretations.

ii. Contextual and Legal Feminism

Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2006, 2015) offers an approach centered on reforming Islamic family law, arguing that the principle of justice is a core foundation of the Shariah. Her involvement in projects such as Musawah demonstrates how legal interpretations and applications can be aligned more closely with gender justice.

iii. Sufi Feminism

A more spiritual approach is presented by Sa'diyya Shaikh (2012) in her book *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*. She explores the thought of Ibn ʿArabi and shows how the framework of Sufism allows for a more inclusive understanding of gender. In Sufism, the relationship between the human being and God does not depend on gender but on spiritual potential. Shaikh argues that Islamic mysticism offers a strong basis for gender justice and the liberation of Muslim women.

The diversity of Islamic feminist movements demonstrates that the struggle for gender justice ranges from textual reinterpretation to legal reform and spiritual experience. This in turn proves that Muslim women are now emerging as agents of

change who advocate for their rights by utilizing religious sources—distinct from Western feminist movements.

BACKGROUND OF SAʿDIYYA SHAIKH

Sa'diyya Shaikh was born in 1969 in Krugersdorp, South Africa, and is of Indian descent. She obtained a degree in psychology from the University of Natal, Durban, South Africa in 1991. In 1993, she earned a degree in religious studies from the University of Cape Town. She continued with her master's studies in the same field and university, completing them in 1996. In 2004, she also obtained a certificate in Women's Studies under the Women's Program at Temple University. She then pursued her PhD in religious studies at Temple University, Philadelphia, completing it in 2004.

Shaikh served as a lecturer in the Department of Religion at Temple University from 1998 to 2000. She was actively involved in religious and community programs with her students. Among her contributions was serving as director of the Seminarian Interaction Program for the National Conference on Community and Justice from 1999 to 2001. She led this initiative by organizing interfaith dialogues and seminars for graduate students from Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions in New York City. The program aimed to foster religious understanding by discussing sensitive issues such as religious diversity, pluralism, and social justice.

As a lecturer, she also participated in a seminar titled "Islamic Feminism: Textual Study" at the Center for Religion and Cross-Cultural Studies, Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, from June to July 2004. Currently, she continues to serve as Professor of Religious Studies in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town since 2002. Shaikh is also involved in several international committees, including the Advisory Committee on Religion and Sexuality Consulting at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) since 2011.Her experience as a lecturer and her engagement in the academic world reflect her deep interest in education. Her ideas and thoughts are expressed through seminars, inter-university programs, and her involvement in various international committees. Thus, her progressive thought is able to reach other countries through her writings and lectures.

Sa'diyya Shaikh's life has been influenced by the socio-political context of apartheid South Africa. A significant aspect of her religious tradition that she strongly upholds in facing contemporary realities is the fact that Islam emphasizes the human struggle for social justice. The patriarchal systems in society and cultural environments often cloaked in religious and traditional rhetoric are equally pressing issues that drive her to advocate for gender justice as taught in Islam (Shaikh, 2003).Her academic writings are grounded in the synergy between intellectual activity, social responsibility, and spiritual commitment. Her works are not solely based on personal opinions, but also address the plurality and diversity that exist within the Islamic world encompassing various socio-cultural and political realities. Therefore, her writings represent a clear rejection of the misunderstandings propagated by intellectual, political, and literary circles regarding Islamic civilization.

SAʿDIYYA SHAIKH'S WORKS

Building on her career as an Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, Sa'diyya Shaikh has produced a range of scholarly publications. Her research focuses on Islamic studies, feminist thought, and Sufism. She has actively authored books, articles, and book chapters. Some examples of her works include Book**:** *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ʿArabi, Gender and Sexuality*Published in 2012, this book explores feminist concerns within the fields of anthropology, Islam, and Sufism. Shaikh elaborates on the hermeneutic methods employed and discusses gender equality through the lens of Ibn ʿArabi's thought. The book is significant not only for contemporary issues, social justice, and feminism, but also for the study of gender in relation to Islamic mysticism. Beside books, there are articles discussed her idea on feminism sufi such as *Islamic Feminist Imaginaries: Love, Beauty and Justice, Ibn ʿArabi and the Mystical Disruption of Gender: Theoretical Explorations in Islamic Feminismand Feminism, Epistemology and Experience: Critically (En)gendering the Study of Islam*.

SAʿDIYYA SHAIKH'S FEMINIST DISCOURSE AS A RESPONSE TO ISLAMOPHOBIC FEMINIST NARRATIVES

Saʿdiyya Shaikh's feminist discourse originates from her critique of Western perspectives on Muslim women, perspectives which are rooted in Islamophobic

narratives. Shaikh critiques the experiences of women that are used as propaganda within Islamophobic rhetoric. According to Shaikh (2013), women's experiences represent one of the epistemological sources in early feminist theory. This is understandable, as women's experiences vary across different ethnicities. Feminist debates since the 1980s have often centered on issues grounded in women's lived experiences. Among such foundational experiences cited by feminism are the social-political hierarchies that marginalize women, especially those from the middle class and First World countries (Omar Mokhtar, 2021). Gender identity, in fact, is interconnected with social location and power, including ethnicity, class, nationality, religion, geopolitical location, and sexual orientation.

This diversity of women's experiences gives rise to the concept of *intersectionality*, which refers to the intersection of differences and has emerged as a crucial theory. It signifies an awareness of the interconnection among various social identities, with gender as one category that relates to others. Such experiences and approaches have led feminist theorists to focus on power relations and inequalities experienced by diverse groups of women (Shaikh, 2012).The importance of maintaining an intersectional approach to women's issues is clearly illustrated in contemporary ideologies that include the experiences of Muslim women. Since the events of September 11, 2001, there has been a proliferation of literature in American and European markets documenting the experiences of Muslim women. These are often narratives by Muslim women who link their suffering to life in Islamic societies, portraying Islam as a religion that discriminates against women. These portrayals conflict with the Islamic concept of women, which requires clarification and differentiation in light of Muslim women's diverse experiences (Shaikh, 2012).

Through neo-conservative ideology and right-wing political agendas, women from Islamic backgrounds have presented their experiences in ways that depict Muslim societies as uncivilized and misogynistic. For political gain, they have received substantial financial support and acclaim. Figures such as Irshad Manji and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, for instance, have received clear backing from U.S.-led military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, portraying themselves as resistors of Islamic fundamentalism. Moreover, books such as *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi, *The Trouble with Islam* by Irshad Manji, and *The Caged Virgin* by Ayaan Hirsi Ali

further reinforce the trope of Muslim women's oppression. These writings undeniably intensify Islamophobia.

Therefore, women's experiences and voices must be discussed within an intersectional framework that demands multi-dimensional analysis. As Shaikh argues, "religion" alone cannot be the sole cause of differing experiences. If examined only through the lens of religion, the perspectives offered may serve political agendas or other interests.

Based on this view, the authors observe that Shaikh attempts to clarify women's status in Islam through two additional approaches such as (i)- Explaining women's rights based on her interpretation of Ibn ʿArabi's thought. (ii) Applying a hermeneutical method to interpret Qurʾanic verses related to women.However, this article focuses only on the first approach Saʿdiyya Shaikh's feminist interpretation of Ibn ʿArabi's thought while the second is discussed in another study.

SAʿDIYYA SHAIKH'S FEMINIST APPROACH THROUGH THE INTERPRETATION OF IBN ʿARABI'S THOUGHT

Shaikh's feminist approach to advocating for Muslim women's rights is conducted through an analysis of the thought of the 13th-century Islamic thinker, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabi. He produced comprehensive understandings of Islamic cosmology, human nature, and profound conceptualizations of gender within tradition. Islam, as Shaikh emphasizes, places importance on the analytical category of "experience." She creatively explores how interpersonal relationships and spiritual experiences are interwoven in mystical concepts.

Shaikh presents a theoretical framework in the field of feminism and religion. Her innovative reading of Ibn ʿArabi's work provides a "vibrant condition of possibility" for contemporary Islamic feminism. For instance, in her renowned book *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ʿArabi, Gender and Sexuality* (2012), Shaikh elaborates on Ibn ʿArabi's religious anthropology, particularly his understanding of human purpose and the nature of existence, and then translates this into discussions of law, gender, and society. Shaikh references certain aspects of Ibn ʿArabi's thought which depict God's most perfect manifestation as observable in women. Therefore,

women possess unparalleled capabilities in sexual intimacy and empathy traits closely tied to knowledge of God.

According to Shaikh (2012), Ibn ʿArabi's theological and anthropological contributions, as presented in the Islamic intellectual tradition, display extraordinary teachings on gender. She argues that men and women in Islam hold equal status, drawing on Ibn ʿArabi's assertions that both genders possess equal capabilities and opportunities to attain high spiritual ranks.For example, Shaikh explains that in discussing human attributes as divine attributes, Ibn ʿArabi integrates the qualities of majesty (jalāl) and mercy (jamāl). He provides strong arguments for the equal spiritual capacities of men and women, including their equal potential to attain the ideal state of the "Perfect Human" (*al-insān al-kāmil*) (Shaikh, 2009).

Shaikh (2015) further articulates gender justice through spiritual praxis, referencing Ibn ʿArabi's concept of *al-insān al-kāmil* to underscore gender equality. Ibn ʿArabi repeatedly asserts that *al-insān al-kāmil* is a spiritual theory independent of gender, equally applicable to men and women. In exploring various forms of sanctity, Ibn ʿArabi highlights verse al-Aḥzāb 33:35, which proclaims spiritual equality for both sexes. He notes that "no spiritual merit is granted to men that is denied to women," and that every righteous deed can be performed by both men and women, with equal reward from God.

Shaikh also underscores the capacity of women to attain the highest spiritual rank, namely that of a *walī* (saint). The idea that power, sin, capacity, and human responsibility apply equally to men and women is central to Ibn ʿArabi's teachings on human nature. This religious anthropology has profound implications for restructuring Islamic law based on gender, as well as addressing deficiencies in current fiqh discourse (Shaikh, 2022).

According to Shaikh, Ibn ʿArabi clearly extends spiritual capacity to women in social agency and, specifically, legal authority. She cites the example of Hajar (Hagar), whose ritual of *saʿī* during the Hajj pilgrimage was institutionalized and applies universally to Muslims. Through this legal framework, she sees the potential for women's spiritual perfection. Gender strength and spiritual capacity thus have the power to shape Islamic law.

Shaikh also discusses legal scenarios where a woman's testimony is given equal weight to that of two men, such as a judge accepting a woman's statement regarding her menstrual cycle in ʿiddah cases, or a husband's acknowledgment of paternity, even with uncertain circumstances. In these cases, a woman's statement is treated as equivalent to the testimony of two men in debt-related matters (Shaikh, 2015).

In discussions of gender and social roles, Ibn ʿArabi offers readers distinct and provocative positions. Regarding the spiritual capacity shared by men and women as described in Qur'an verse al-Aḥzāb 33:35, he also touches upon prophethood, the mission of messengers, and apostleship. He refers to a ḥadīth which affirms that both Maryam, the daughter of ʿImrān, and Asiyah, the wife of Pharaoh, attained spiritual excellence (kamāl). Furthermore, in relation to the station of prophethood (nubuwwah), Ibn ʿArabi explains that only men are granted the superlative degree of perfection (akmaliyyah) (Shaikh, 2015).

Men and women share in certain degrees of spiritual excellence (kamāl). Hence, both can attain prophethood (nubuwwah). However, some individuals are granted preference through their status as messengers with divine missions. Men and women share certain spiritual stages, while some stages involve prioritization, as God states in the Qur'an: "Indeed, We have preferred some prophets over others" (Qur'an, al-Isrāʾ 17:55). God has also made men and women equally bound by legal rulings. The obligations of women mirror those of men. Likewise, if rulings apply exclusively to women in certain cases, the same is true for men in others (Shaikh, 2015).

Additionally, Shaikh clarifies gender equality in legal matters by citing Ibn ʿArabi's view that both men and women in Islam follow the same legal rulings (fiqh). For instance, in her study (Shaikh, 2009), she notes that Ibn ʿArabi believed both men and women are equally qualified to lead mixed-gender congregational prayers—a topic of significant contemporary debate among 21st-century Muslims. She also argues that women can establish legal rulings for the Muslim community (Shaikh, 2013).

Ibn ʿArabi holds that ontological differences between men and women—such as issues relating to ʿawrah (modesty and covering)—carry ethical implications for

gender, including in dress code practices. His arguments for women's social equality are clearly grounded in theological views that emphasize the ontological parity of men's and women's spiritual nature. These are based on his readings of core Islamic sources and his own mystical experiences. Furthermore, Shaikh critically engages with Ibn ʿArabi's writings on gender by applying feminist analysis to the tensions between patriarchal formulations and egalitarian gender principles within his works. Importantly, this tension does not deviate from his original ideas on gender and women in the 13th century.

On Women's Leadership, Ibn ʿArabi adopts a courageous position regarding female leadership in prayer—a topic that has generated significant debate in recent times. He is quoted as follows:

> Some permit women to lead men and women in prayer. Shaikh (2015) agrees with this view. Only a few scholars strictly forbid it. Others allow women to lead prayers for female congregations only. How should this be assessed? The Prophet testified to spiritual perfection (*kamāl*) in certain women, just as he witnessed it in some men, although there may have been more men than women who attained this level. Since perfection (*kamāl*) is synonymous with prophethood (*nubuwwah*), and the Prophet held a leadership role, this affirms that the principle of female imamate is valid. Those who prohibit it without solid evidence can be dismissed. For Shaikh, such prohibition lacks definitive textual basis. These restrictions are merely negative opinions, and such arguments are insufficient to override fundamental principles that allow for women's leadership in prayer (Shaikh, 2015).

Here, Shaikh once again asserts that Ibn ʿArabi links the Prophet's recognition of women's spiritual capacities to their ritual leadership potential—challenging the views of scholars who reject female imamate. In this case, spiritual excellence suggests an individual's eligibility for ritual leadership, regardless of gender. While some classical scholars—such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 923)—have addressed the issue of female imams, it has never been considered a central controversy. In fact, historical documentation on women serving as imams is quite limited.

Through her study *Islamic Laws, Sufism and Gender: Rethinking the Terms of the Debate* (2015), Shaikh proposes that applying a Sufi lens to gender discourse in Islamic law opens up space for Muslim feminists to explore foundational principles of jurisprudence. Any practice that directs inquiry into the definition of humanity, the God-human relationship, and the related implications for social ethics can inform legal discussions.

Shaikh argues that specific strands of Sufism offer a wealth of resources for developing richer, more relevant interpretations of Islamic law and understandings of human nature—ones that transcend existing fiqh discourse. Her analysis of core Sufi teachings proposes a reexamination of ontology and metaphysics to reshape gender ethics in emerging feminist legal frameworks.

Shaikh believes that the underexplored relationship between Sufism and Islamic law warrants renewed attention in order to develop contemporary gender ethics. She critically engages with what she sees as shortcomings in gendered religious anthropology that underpins dominant interpretations of *qiwāmah* (male authority) and *wilāyah* (guardianship). Through a feminist dialogue with Sufi religious anthropology, she offers an alternative foundation for addressing issues of gender relations and Islamic law. Shaikh writes:

> "Sufis do not hold a singular position on gender nor is Sufism an ahistorical panacea of all things good and benevolent for women. Al-Ghazali, who criticized the shortcomings of a law not firmly rooted in ethical praxis, simultaneously formulated an ethics of justice saturated with male domination. Sufism as practiced in a variety of historical contexts, like other areas of Muslim thought and practice, has been characterized by tensions between patriarchal inclinations and egalitarian impulses. Although negative understandings of women emerged in some strands of Sufi thought and practices from its inception, particularly during its earlier ascetic variety, Sufism in other instances has provided gender-egalitarian spaces. Textual evidence suggests that early Sufi women adopted diverse approaches to piety and practice." (Shaikh, 2015)

This statement explains that, although negative conceptions of women have emerged in some strands of Sufi thought—especially during early ascetic phases—Sufism in other contexts has fostered gender-egalitarian environments. Textual evidence shows that early Sufi women adopted diverse approaches to devotion and practice. Despite embracing forms of asceticism and spiritual discipline, their lifestyles ranged from traditional gender roles such as mother and wife to nontraditional roles such as independent travelers, teachers, disciples, and practitioners of mystical knowledge in their own right.

ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVES ON SAʿDIYYA SHAIKH'S FEMINIST IDEAS

Saʿdiyya Shaikh's integration of feminism, hermeneutics, and Sufism in addressing gender issues in Islam must be critically assessed through the lens of mainstream Islamic epistemology. Her use of Ibn ʿArabi's mystical thought to support comprehensive gender equality in Islam raises important concerns. Although Ibn ʿArabi is known as a great Sufi thinker who developed the concept of *al-insān al-kāmil* and *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of existence), Shaikh's interpretation of his works to support modern feminist agendas appears highly selective and is not grounded in established disciplines of Qur'anic exegesis and Shariah.

Ibn ʿArabi's ideas do not represent the totality of Islamic tradition. In fact, as widely acknowledged, his mystical terminologies require cautious engagement and are not suited to literal interpretation by the general public due to their symbolic and esoteric nature. Using Sufi discourse as justification to reinterpret Shariah rulings—such as those concerning *ʿawrah*, male leadership in the family, or women's roles in prayer—is a method that deviates from the principles of *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* (Islamic legal methodology).

Moreover, Shaikh openly rejects traditional interpretations of the Qur'an and ḥadīth on the grounds that they are patriarchally constructed. She attempts to replace classical scholarly approaches with feminist and contextual re-readings. This risks undermining the authority of the ʿulamāʾ, *ijmāʿ* (scholarly consensus), and the science of *sanad* (transmission), which are essential to the authenticity of Islamic rulings. In Islam, the interpretation of Qur'an and understanding of ḥadīth must follow

methodologies passed down through generations of righteous predecessors—not modern theories rooted in secular ideologies.

CONCLUSION

Saʿdiyya Shaikh's attempt to introduce feminist agendas into Islamic discourse through hermeneutics and Sufism is a questionable endeavor and should be rejected by Muslims committed to revelation and sound scholarly tradition. While the defense of women's rights is indeed a noble cause, it must be rooted in the authentic disciplines of Islamic knowledge—not foreign theories that may jeopardize faith and Islamic law. Islam already provides a balanced framework for gender justice based on divine revelation and natural disposition (*fiṭrah*), without the need to rely on relativistic or external ideologies that conflict with the *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* (higher objectives of Islamic law).

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