

**The Celibacy of Rābi'a Basrī: A Case for Textual Reconstruction of Women in Islam**

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**ABSTRACT**

Piouswomen in Islamicate societies are usually understood as uncritical subjects who have internalized the norms of Islamic discourse. Such societies supposedly offer little room for the expression of their individual agency by situating women as passive subjects of a male-dominated hegemonic order. Until recently, it was impossible to conceive a pious Muslim woman without reference to the totalising nature of Islamic discourse, which erases all traces of her individuality. A similar perceptual framework was extended to understand the role of women in Medieval Islamicate societies on account of their negligible presence in textual and oral sources. For the few pious women who were studied from pre-modern times, references to their piety were exclusively framed with regard to their kinship relations with other pious men. Rābi'a Basrī (d.801), in such a context, emerges as a curious instance as her piety was not tethered in familial terms to other prominent male figures. Her sainthood represents departure from the dominant mode in which piety for women was framed at the time, especially with regard to kinship. This paper aims to analyse the manner in which the Early Early Chishtī Sufī Shaikhhs of Delhi addressed her celibacy and provided a model for female piety that evaded the traditional modes of associating piety to kinship relations.

**Keywords: Rābi'a Basrī. Women Saints. Sufi. Early Chishtī Shaikhhs. Celibacy**

The status of Women in Islamicate societies has always been a fraught one.

<sup>1</sup> Such societies supposedly offer little room for the expression of their individual agency by situating women as passive subjects of a male-dominated hegemonic order. This is especially true with regard to pious women, whose subjection to the Islamic order is perceived as total and absolute. In other words, until recently, it was impossible to conceive a pious Muslim woman without reference to the totalising nature of Islamic discourse, which erases all traces of her individuality. A similar perceptual framework has been extended to understand the role of women in Medieval Islamicate societies on account of their negligible presence in textual and oral sources. For the few pious women who have been studied from pre-modern times, references to their piety have been exclusively framed with regard to their kinship relations with other pious men. Rābi'a Basrī (d.801), in such a context, emerges as a curious instance as her piety was not tethered in familial terms to other prominent male figures. Her sainthood posed a huge departure from the dominant mode in which piety for women was framed at the time, especially with regard to kinship. Perhaps due to this

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<sup>1</sup>Marshall G.S. Hodgson coined the term 'Islamicate' as he felt the urgent need in modern scholarship to distinguish between the word Islam and Islamic for religion and Islamicate for the culture and society associated with the followers of Islam. "See Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World of Islam*, Lahore: Vanguard Books Pvt. Ltd, 2004, pp. 57-60.

departure, her celibacy became an issue that was specifically addressed in Sufi texts that memorialised her as a saint. In this essay, I shall analyse the manner in which the Early Early Chishtī Sufi Shaikhs of Delhi - Nizām al-Dīn (d.1325), Nasīr al-Dīn (d.1356) addressed her celibacy and provided a model for female piety that evaded the traditional modes of associating piety to kinship relations.

Until recently, women were relegated to complete anonymity in the study of medieval Islamicate societies perhaps on account of their minimal references in the literary production of the time. Lately, scholars like Annemarie Schimmel, Ruby Lal, Weibke Walther and Michael Calabria have endeavoured to address this lacuna.<sup>2</sup> They have pieced together the meagre references to women to assess their contributions in the political, social, cultural, literary, religious and spiritual life of the times in Islamicate societies. The work of such scholars is crucial, but they have barely discussed the literary interventions through which the accounts of these women were preserved. Therefore, such studies are too focussed on producing a “model of agency” for women, where Islamic discourse itself remains unaccommodating to these women. This oversight was largely due to the fact that writings from the past were merely considered as sources of historical facts. In recent historiography, however, there is recognition that texts have their own fraught conditions of production. This recognition situates texts as more than pre-constituted wholes, which mutely attest to the historical record. Rather, historical writings receive the attention as crucial artefacts that are a result of specific narrative processes and strategies that enable a past to be presented. As a result, one can emphasise certain episodes from medieval texts to cull insights about specific social concerns that prevailed at the time. To this end, I shall discuss how Rābi‘a Basrī’s celibacy is negotiated in medieval texts, independent of her familial relation to male Sufis.

### **Rābi‘a Basrī: The Narrative Production of an Exceptional Sufi**

My analysis is based on a perusal of Sufi texts called *malḡūzāt* (table talks) and their relation to a single *tadhkirāt* (biography), which memorialized the Sufi saint. The *malḡūzāt* mark a subtle departure from the *tadhkirāt*, which served as a memorial of Sufi saints, where Rābi‘a Basrī, a lone woman is exemplified as a saint along with 71 eminent male Sufis. The *tadhkirāt* was penned by Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār (d. somewhere between 1220-1230) and is called *tadkirāt al-Auliya* (Memorials of the Saints) and is considered as the first biography of Sufis.<sup>3</sup> The *tadhkirāt* and *malḡūzāt* were penned to sanctify Sufi Shaikhs as saints. Since there was no institutional canonization of saints in Islam, the *malḡūzāt* and *tadhkirāt* served as mechanisms to build the charisma of the Sufi Shaikhs by focusing on their didactics and asceticism and miracles.<sup>4</sup> Olga Solovieva has indicated that ‘Attār utilized the above narrative trope as a “forceful defence mechanism” to deal with any

<sup>2</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *My Soul is a woman: The Feminine in Islam*, New York: The Continuum Publishing Co., 1999 ; Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; Weibke Walther, *Women in Islam*, tr. into English, C.V.S. Salt, London: George Prior Associated Publisher Ltd., 1981 and Michael D. Calabria, “Women and Gender in Islam from Revelation to Revolution”, in *Nur: The Newsletter of the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies*, Fall, 2017, Vol. 3. No.1.

<sup>3</sup> Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār, *Tadhkirāt al-Auliya*, translated and abridged into English by A. J. Arberry, *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from Tadhkirāt al-Auliya* (Memorials of the Saints), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973 p.1 and Michael A. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur’an, Mi’raj, Poetic and Theological Writing*, edited and translated into English, Srinagar: Gulshan books, 2009, p. 151.

<sup>4</sup> Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History*, (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 81-103.

possible threat to his inclusion of Rābi‘a, a woman as a saint in the *tadhkirāt*. The author has elaborated that ‘Attar accomplished that by portraying Rābi‘a in the text as a “Sufi role model” par excellence exemplifying her ascetic eminence and selfless love for God.<sup>5</sup> Her status as “a Sufi role model” will become important later when we discuss the interventions of the Delhi Shaikhs.

A native of Basra, in present day Iraq, Rābi‘a is also known as Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya, and legends associated with her abound in several Sufi texts.<sup>6</sup> Like most Sufi literature, the aforementioned *malfūzāt* remain silent on her early life.<sup>7</sup> However from Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār’s biography of Rābi‘a one can attempt to reconstruct her early life. She was born to poor but devout parents, and her birth was associated with miracles. Since she was born to her parents after three daughters, they named her Rābi‘a, meaning the fourth one in Arabic. After losing her parents as a child, she was separated from her sisters and was sold as a slave to a harsh master, who mistreated her. The master upon finding her praying all through the night after a hard day’s relentless labour, realised that she was no ordinary mortal and liberated her. After obtaining freedom, Rābi‘a immersed herself in prayers and meditation.<sup>8</sup>

The *malfūzāt*, on the other hand, contain the discourses of the Early Chishtī Sufi Shaikhs of Delhi - Nizām al-Dīn (d.1325), Nasīr al-Dīn (d.1356).<sup>9</sup> Amīr Hasan Sizjī, an eminent disciple of the Chishtī Shaikh Nizām al-Dīn compiled the Shaikh’s discourse (*malfūz*/singular, *malfūzāt*/ plural) titled *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād* between the years (1307 and 1322). Shaikh Nasīr al-Dīn carried his master Shaikh Nizām al-Dīn’s spiritual mantle in Delhi from 1325. Hamīd Qalandar, a disciple penned Shaikh Nasīr al-Dīn’s *malfūz*, the *Khair al-Majālis* between the years 1354 and 1356. The saints had addressed their discourses to followers, who gathered around them to listen to their preaching. These *malfūzāt* of the Shaikhs have reached us on account of the literary interventions of these compiler-disciples.<sup>10</sup> To an extent, my study is limited to scrutinizing the narrative processes associated with the way these Sufi Shaikhs addressed Rābi‘a Basrī’s celibacy and negotiated a space for female piety. My intervention can serve to illuminate a path for subsequent efforts in Medieval studies to study the social milieu for minor historical figures on whom primary sources are scant.

<sup>5</sup> Ologa Solovieva, “Veiled with a Special Veil” Ascetic Configurations of Identity in ‘Attār’s Memorial of Rābi‘a of Basra” at <http://ir.uiwo.edu.mff/vol49/No.2>, 2013, pp. 4-28.

<sup>6</sup> Rābi‘a’s father was called Esmā‘il al-Adawwiya that is why she is also referred to as Rābi‘a al-Adawwiya. See Arberry, *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> Generally little is known about the early life of most Sufi saints as they largely become popular either late in their lives or after death. Generally both oral and written traditions memorialize their spirituality and little attention is paid to their worldly lives prior to their becoming Sufis. Hence it is very difficult to piece together anything about their early life with certainty.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, *Rābi‘a: The Mystic*, pp. 5-8 and Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, pp. 155-7.

<sup>9</sup> Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī (d.1233) introduced the Chishtī *tarīqa* in India in the thirteenth century. His disciple Qutb al-Dīn (d.1232) lived as a recluse in Delhi, engrossed in devotion. Farīd al-Dīn, succeeded him and preached from Ajodhan (now in Pakistan), which was renamed as Pakpatan (the pure village), in his memory. See Bruce B. Lawrence, *Notes from a Distant Flute*, p. 23.

Farīd al-Dīn was popularly known as Ganj-i-Shakar (d.1265) should not be confused with Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār of Nishāpur. Nizām al-Dīn (d.1325), Nasīr al-Dīn (d.1356) and Gesū Darāz (d.1422) were tied in master-disciple relations. They succeeded the Chishtī Shaikh in a row in Delhi. Bruce B. Lawrence has referred to these Sufi Shaikhs as the Early Chishtīs. See Bruce B. Lawrence, *Notes from a Distant Flute*, Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of philosophy, 1978, pp. 20-2 and 27-44.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed analysis of the authorial mediations impacting the telling in the texts, See K. Khan, *The Textual Formation of a Malfūz: A Historical Study of the Khair al-Majālis*, thesis submitted to the University of Delhi for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, 2016, pp.1-51.

### The Negotiation of Female Piety by Early Chishtī Sufi Shaikhs: Exceptional Asceticism

In their *malfūzāt*, the early Chishtī Sufi Shaikhs, occasionally attribute piety to mothers and female sibling of the Sufi saints. This is especially true for Shaikhs Farīd al-Dīn (d.1265) and Nizām al-Dīn as their initiation into the mystic path is attributed to their mothers.<sup>11</sup> At other moments, these texts also dwell on the pietistic perfections of the wives of the Prophet, ‘Ā’isha-Umm al-Mu’minīn (mother of all believers) and Hazrat Bibi Khadija, and her daughter Bibi Fātima al-Zahrā. It is evident from these instances that the Shaikhs were preoccupied with providing a familial basis to the piety of women. In contrast, Rābi’a Basrī was celebrated in these *malfūzāt*, as a paradigm of spiritual perfection in her own right-independent of kinship relations with pious males. Since her parents and other consanguine kin were not reputed mystics, the only mode available to classifying Rābi’a in terms of familial association was by way of matrimony- a status that she could have readily assumed in her life but notably did not. In spite of recognising her exceptional status as a pious woman, the Shaikhs were aware that her celibate status therefore, posed a problem, which needed to be addressed.

The Indian Chishtī Shaikh Nasīr al-Dīn’s *malfūz* recounts an episode related to the concerns of the three Great Sufi Shaikhs regarding Rābi’a’s decision to remain celibate. While in ‘Attār’s account Hasan Basrī is mentioned as the person who came to her with other Sufis to convince her to marry, in the Chishtī retelling of the incident, Hasan Basrī approached her with two renowned Sufis, Ibrāhīm Adham and Dhūl Nun al-Misrī. Of the two accounts the Chishtī account is more engaging and pertinent. The questions that Rābi’a put to Hasan Basrī did not concern with one’s state after death instead she poses to him questions about the struggles one faces while controlling one’s *nafs* (base desires) as a celibate.

Nasīr al-Dīn relates to his audience that Rābi’a Basrī had renounced the world and her fame of devotion and asceticism had spread far and wide. Along with her achievements in mysticism, her repute as a woman of great beauty and charm was also well known. The scholars and Sufi Shaikhs of Basra were apprehensive that the Satan would mislead her easily on account of her being a single woman with such appealing attributes. They met her and advised her to take a life partner arguing,

*‘Kūdaki agar cheh bā-adab bāshad chārah nīst az mu’dib, wa r’āiyat, agarche sālih bāshad chārah nīst az walī, wa zan, agar cheh zāhid bāshad chārah nīst az kḥasm.’*

‘Even though a child has manners, he still needs a teacher. Similarly though the subjects may be righteous, nonetheless they require a ruler. In the same manner even though a woman is an ascetic still she must take a husband.’<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Amīr Ḥasan Sijzī, *Fawā’id al-Fu’ād*, edited by Khwaja Hasan Thani Nizami, Dehlavi (Urdu Academy, 1992) pp.p. 210; Ḥamīd Qalandar, *Khair al-Majālis*, edited by Khaliq A. Nizami (Aligarh : Department of History, Aligarh University Press, 1959), p.190.

<sup>12</sup> Ḥamīd Qalandar, *Khair al-Majālis*, pp. 200-1.

On hearing them speak thus, Rābi‘a Basrī was quick to perceive that they had approached her to persuade her to marry. She asked those knowledgeable and devout men as to who was the most learned amidst them to come forward and satisfactorily respond to her queries. The men assigned the task of conversing with her to Khwāja Hasan Basrī. The first query she put to him from behind the curtain that separated the men from her was,

“In how many parts has reason been created?”

Khwāja Hasan Basrī: “Ten.”

Rābi‘a Basrī: “How has it been apportioned to men and women?”

Khwāja Hasan Basrī: “Nine measures have been given to men and one to women.”

Rābi‘a Basrī: “How many portions of sensuality (*nafs*) is there and how is it allocated to men and women?”

Khwāja Hasan Basrī: “Ten. Of which nine parts are assigned to women and one to men.”

Rābi‘a Basrī: “How is it that with one part of reason, I am able to control my nine portions of sensuality and you men cannot restraint your one measure of sensuality with such a large part of rationality given to you.”<sup>13</sup>

In the account, the task of questioning and persuading Rābi‘a is assigned to Khwāja Hasan Basrī. In Shaikh Nasār al-Dīn’s discussion two more Sufis get associated with her in the encounter with Hasan Basrī. This was to establish that Rābi‘a had belied the fears of the great mystics regarding her celibacy so that none could question her decision. The reference of such renowned Sufis was also meant to provide sanctity and validity to Rābi‘a’s decision to be celibate and the reasons she gave for it. Diverse retellings of the same anecdote are quite common in Sufi texts. This is because author-compilers deploy such retellings as vehicles for spiritual ideas, their value as a record of factual occurrences is of secondary importance to our purpose here.

What is of primary importance in the aforementioned narrative, is the desire to convey that Rābi‘a’s celibacy was of grave concern for even her male contemporaries. However, the rhetorical strategy employed by the Shaikhs to address that concern was to subordinate her celibate status to her commitment to spiritual devotion. In other words, the Shaikhs projected that she was celibate in spite of several suitors seeking her hand in marriage. By doing so, the Shaikhs positioned her celibacy as an expression of her ascetic devotion to God. Her status as a celibate ascetic is corroborated by numerous other legends where she spurns great scholars, Sufis and people wielding political power who desired her hand in marriage.<sup>14</sup> In all of these narratives, she rejects her suitors for the same reason- her single-minded devotion to God.

The Chishtī *malḥuzāt*, under survey the Shaikhs preached to a live audience, which consisted of people from varied backgrounds in addition to simply those who were mystically inclined. Hence their narrative was more

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Wahid bin Zain (d.793), a renowned theologian, ascetic, preacher and a writer wished to marry Rābi‘a. The other was Muhammad bin Sulaiman al-Hashimi, the Abbasid noble of Basra, who offered all his riches while seeking her hand in matrimony. The people of Basra recommended to its Governor, that he should take Rābi‘a as his spouse but she shunned them all saying that they should not distract her from God. See Margaret Smith, *Rabi‘a: The Mystic*, pp. 10-11.

dramatized in relating incidents concerning Rābi'a's marriage. This is in contrast with the biography (*tadkirāt*) penned by Farīd al-Dīn 'Attār, which was meant to be consulted at leisure by those who already nursed an interest in the history of the saints. The purpose, however, in both kinds of texts, was to communicate that Rābi'a was an *exceptional* ascetic whose spiritual attainment was beyond reproach from worldly concerns about her matrimonial status.

One can see from these narratives that by associating Rābi'a's celibacy to her ascetic devotion, she was being sanctified as a saint par excellence, her commitment to controlling one's *nafs* (base desires) as a celibate was being used as an example not just for women Sufis, but Sufis as a whole class. Her celibacy in the narratives, therefore, was conferring upon her an exceptional status as an example that allowed her piety to escape the traditional mode of familial association.

To this end, Rābi'a is used as an example but not in the common-sense way in which we think of examples. Instead, her exemplification follows a unique logical structure, which ultimately allows her exemplification to evade traditional familial associations. According to the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben the example is characterised by the fact that wherever it exerts its force it holds true for all cases of the same type.<sup>15</sup> In our situation Rābi'a's celibacy is an example of her ascetic devotion. As an example of ascetic devotion, it is a singularity among other examples of ascetic devotion, it stands for all acts of ascetic devotion and serves to illustrate their character- this is the universal character of the example. However, due to its singular character, her celibacy as a woman, cannot serve the "universal" class of ascetic devotion *in its* particularity. As Agamben writes "Neither particular nor universal, the example is a singular object that presents itself as such, that *shows* its singularity"<sup>16</sup>. The exemplary Sufi therefore, is not reducible to a particular property "like being celibate" or being "abstemious" but rather by being called-Rābi'a (So it will always be control base desire as Rābi'a did). It is through her singular character that she stands in for the broader class of ascetic devotion. It is through this being-called Rābi'a that a Sufi class of ascetic devotion to which other Sufis can belong. One shall notice here, that in being-called Rābi'a i.e. through using her as an example, the Shaikhs are performing a far more radical operation than simply using her as a model to be emulated. In fact, I argue, they are extricating her from her specific and singular existence as a woman Sufi and placing her as neither the Universal and nor the Particular, but rather as an instance that *shows her* singularity i.e. as a Sufi Saint. Through this operation, Rābi'a no

<sup>15</sup>Agamben, Giorgio. *The coming community*. Vol. 1. U of Minnesota Press, 1993.p.9.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p.10

longer needs to be associated to fathers, brothers, sons and even husbands (as we have seen). Instead, she stands beside her self, beyond the confines of gender and kinship.

### Conclusion

Closer to our own times, there has been a welcome shift to re-imagine feminine Islamic subjects in modern Islamicate societies, especially with regard to pious women<sup>17</sup> (Mahmood, Lughod). Mahmood specifically, has understood such perceptions of pious women in Egypt during the Islamic Revival movement as deeply enmeshed with modern understandings of liberal subjectivity.<sup>18</sup> While Mahmood is able to wedge space open to understand the subjectivity of modern pious women in this fashion, we cannot perform such analyses on women in Medieval Islamicate societies, who do not bear the same relation to liberal subjectivity as modern Islamic women do. Further, history constrains us from essaying the same themes for Medieval Islam ethnographically. In the studies on *tasawwuf* Sufism on the other hand, we can take recourse to analysing textual processes employed in representing women on specific issues. I have simply offered a prototype with regard to the construction of Rābi'a's celibacy but analyses such as my own can then be used to carve out a space where the relationship between Islam and gender can be rendered more fruitfully than trite repetitions of erasure.

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<sup>17</sup>Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of piety*. Princeton University Press, 2011; Amir-Moazami, Schirin, Christine M. Jacobsen, and Maleiha Malik. "Islam and gender in Europe: subjectivities, politics and piety." (2011): 1-8. Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim women need saving?*. Harvard University Press, 2013.

<sup>18</sup>Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of piety*. Princeton University Press, 2011, p.22.