

# A Dialogue

*Mohammed Faghfoory and Mahi Tourage*

**MOHAMMED FAGHFOORY:** I read the review on my book, *Kernel of the Kernel*, in a recent edition of the journal [21:2] and would like to respond to some of the reviewer's remarks. The bulk of the review is, in fact, taken from the book itself and is nothing more than a description of each chapter's content. That is fine by itself, and your journal's format requires that. It is, however, to his concluding paragraph that I would like to address my response, where he talks about Sufism in light of feminist literature and theories, which are alien to Islamic spirituality.

First, the reviewer's statement that "No women are found among all the Shi'ite scholars and masters of esoteric sciences" is simply wrong. As early as the first Islamic century, Sufism produced masters like Rabi'ah `Adawiyah, to whom Hasan al-Basri, the celebrated patriarch of Basrah and the first major Sufi master, referred to frequently for spiritual advice. To this, one must add prominent women like Sayyidah Nafisah (the daughter of Imam Hasan) and Sayyidah `A'ishah (the daughter of Imam Sadiq), whose mastery of exoteric and esoteric knowledge have been acknowledged by Sufi masters like Ibn `Ata'llah Iskandarani and many others. One might also mention Fatimah of Nayshabur, the Persian Nizam, and another Fatimah who was, in fact, the spiritual master of the octogenarian Sufi master Muhy al-Din ibn al-`Arabi.

More problematic is the reviewer's statement on Sufi doctrine and its view on men and women. When God decided to manifest Himself, He did so through Revelation, cosmos, and human being (microcosm). We read in the Qur'an that God is *Ahad* (He is One, Absolute) and *Samad* (Sufficient to Himself, Infinite). This means that everything is contained in Him. Thus, God

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Editor's Note: In a past issue of AJISS (21:2), Mahdi Tourage (before he became AJISS' book review editor) reviewed *Kernel of the Kernel, Concerning the Wayfaring and Spiritual Journey of the People of Intellect, A Shi'i Approach to Sufism*, by Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Husayni Tihirani, ed; Mohammad H. Faghfoori, trans. Dr Faghfoory sent a letter to the editorial board outlining areas where he felt the review was misplaced, largely for our own edification. The editorial board felt that his response was quite illuminating, and, with his permission, passed it along to Dr Tourage (now our book review editor). Dr Tourage's response also seemed illuminating, and so, with their permission, the board decided to publish their exchange in the hopes that the readers would also find their dialogue and disagreement interesting.

contains both feminine and masculine aspects, as reflected in His Names and Attributes (*asma' wa sifat*), for some Names represent God's feminine qualities of Mercy, Beauty, and Subtlety (i.e., *al-Rahim*, *al-Latif*, and *al-Jamil*), while others represent His masculine attributes of Majesty and Power (*al-'Azim*, *al-Qadir*, and *al-Muqtadir*). Therefore, metaphysically speaking, Allah is both male and female, yet He is neither by virtue of being God. It is in this context that one should understand "the socio-cultural construction of gender and class" in Sufism, and not through the lenses of feminist theories formulated in secular, non-Islamic, pseudo-socialist western intellectual circles.

**MAHDI TOURAGE:** In my review of this book, I found it noteworthy that among the many Shi'i masters of esoteric sciences that he mentions there is not even one woman. Of course I know about the Muslim women mystics, but that was not the issue; the esoteric masters of recent centuries, who are the focus of his book, are the issue. My point was about this book and not the Shi'i tradition in general; his answer is focused on the cases of women Sufi mystics in general.

**MOHAMMAD H. FAGHFOORY:** I meant to question his accurate reading of the book and understanding of its message, a message that is universal, genderless, and unbound by time and space. A careful review of his response convinced me in my conclusion even more, as the reviewer did not even notice that the author of the text was, in fact, 'Allamah Tabataba'i and not Tihrani, who was just the editor and the compiler.

Furthermore, in his response the reviewer mentions that he meant that "no women are found among all the Shi'i scholars [and] esoteric masters of recent centuries." If you read the review more carefully, you will notice that he says: "Finally, it should be noted that a gender-sensitive reading of the *Kernel of the Kernel* would find it problematic that no women were found among all the Shi'i scholars and masters of esoteric sciences."

The term 'Allamah Tabataba'i uses is genderless (*Ulu'l Albab*), and "People of Intellect" is an accurate translation of this term. Other scholars like Nasr and Chittick have used it. "People" is a plural noun and is genderless, like *insan* in Arabic and *Man* in classical English. I am convinced that the meaning of *Man/insan* in classical texts makes his remarks about gender and class in Sufism in general, and in my book in particular, irrelevant.

In classical English, *Man* was synonymous with *insan* (human being), that is, the *Androgenic Man* who is beyond gender. Only in the twentieth century did *Man* lose this usage as a result of the influence of leftist and fem-

inist literature. Sufis always address each human being in the Qur'anic meaning of the term *al-Insan* (*Man* in the above meaning) and talk of God, who is both male and female and yet beyond gender by virtue of being God. That is why Ibn al-'Arabi calls God with both masculine and feminine pronouns: *hiya* and *huwa*. Adam, the *Androgenic Man*, possessed femininity and masculinity equally, and Eve, the *Androgenic Woman*, possessed both male and female qualities as well. Each of them was a *Perfect Man* (*al-Insan al-Kamil*) unto themselves. The fact that Tabatba'i did not mention the names of female Shi'i scholars and masters of esoteric sciences is perhaps just an accident. It does not mean they did not exist, he was unaware of them, or chose to ignore them. Gender and class were simply not his concern. It is the result of his understanding of *Ulu'l Albab*/People of Intellect that includes both men and women who can – and do – travel on the path side by side. He assumed that the reader of such a technical text to be aware of this principle.

So I do not believe I misunderstood his point, because what applies to Sufism in general applies to this book as well.

**MAHDI TOURAGE:** I am writing these lines as a Shi'i Muslim believer, and the esoteric tradition represented in this book is an important part of my own religious/cultural heritage. Hence, I refer the reader back to my review where I praise the book: "... a fine example of the kind of writing that demonstrates the continuing tradition of esoteric commentaries."

However, this tradition renders women peripheral. The translator may not have a satisfactory response to the omission of women in this book other than building an impermeable wall around Sufism itself and declaring all other epistemologies alien. Within this imaginary wall, no better explanation of why no female Shi'i scholars are mentioned in the book other than "perhaps just an accident" is possible. Even if feminist theories are "formulated in secular, non-Islamic, pseudo-socialist western intellectual circles" (of course this statement neglects the existence of Muslim feminists), this does not discount their inquiries and valid critique. This untenable separation of secular-religious, West-East, modern-traditional is unproductive. After all, this excellent translation is produced through a secular western university press, and both the translator and the writer of the foreword, S. H. Nasr, are affiliated with a secular, non-Islamic western university. The translator himself uses *androgenic*, a term borrowed from western intellectual circles, to describe the Sufi understanding of *Man/insan*, who is beyond gender. What is the Arabic/Persian term for *androgenic*?

I respectfully posit to the translator that his words “Sufis always address the human being in the Qur’anic meaning of the term *al-Insan* [the *Androgenic Man* who is beyond gender]” are incorrect sweeping generalizations that do not hold against the available textual evidence. I have shown elsewhere that in the *Mathnawi* of Jalal al-Din Rumi, for example, what appears to be a collapsing of gendered categories of masculine and feminine into an androgynous figure is, in fact, a case of androcentrism that liquidates the feminine and privileges the masculine in all relations of power.<sup>1</sup> When we add to this the predominant negative traditional view of women as deficient creatures in respect to their bodies and understandings, and that the feminine is associated with the material world, androgyny turns out to be (in some cases, at least) a poetic fiction of original plenitude. It is not surprising, then, that textual or pictorial depictions of androgynes in Persian Sufi literature are (feminized) males and never masculine women.

Certainly we do not need feminism to tell us that discourses producing gendered power relations that systematically render women peripheral, if not invisible, are simply unjust and, hence, flawed. Neither do we need to be “pseudo-socialist” to advocate justice. Ultimately, the issue is not gender, but that of justice. My question thus still remains: Where are the female Shi`i masters of esoteric sciences in this book?

### Endnote

1. Mahdi Tourage, “The Hermeneutics of Eroticism in the Poetry of Rumi,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 25, no. 2 (2005): 600-16.