

UGC Major Research Project:
“Dhikral-Niswa al-Mutaabidat as Sufiyat
(Biographies of devotional Sufi Women) Translation and Annotation.”

Summary

Traditional historiography excluded women from ‘Universal’ or ‘general’ history. Whenever a scholar tried to draw attention towards it, very pointedly a common question was asked – Is there women’s history?

After 1960s, one witnesses rapid expansion in historical field. Woman remained no longer insignificant in history. Scholars showed ever growing interest in gender questions within their historical research. One found history of women as rich and complicated as that of men. It is of course different from history of men in terms of their historical experiences. Historians began to retrieve women from historical pages and created people’s interest to know more about their status, experience and contributions in various fields.

Women’s history basically deals with women’s struggle to get their due recognition which has been denied to them, and one could see women taking part in every sphere besides diligently performing her traditional assigned roles. In the present period of globalization, her role has become equally significant as that of men’s. One can call it dialectical materialism, because there is somewhat conflicting situation between women’s growing empowerment and traditional subordinate role.

One feels the visible change in women’s condition. She is endeavoring to make her place in the society. Now scholars have paid full attention towards full fledged studies of women. Many scholars became sensitive and emotional to the extent of being biased in favour of women. They are termed as feminist scholars. They put the women’s role in historical frame work and brought it out to the readers. Here one tries to understand the role of women in historical perspective. Her role was scrutinized in every sphere of life including religion. Most of the religions were created by men, hence woman remained follower or played subordinate role.

Conservative and orthodox religious scholars pushed the woman into background and did not highlight her competence and intelligence. But woman continued her struggle to create a rightful space for her in the society and men are reluctant to accept her talent and qualities. In ancient India, a woman named Roussa wrote about one hundred and four diseases and their treatment. Her work was translated from Sanskrit to Arabic in the Arab World. In the sphere of polity, one recalls the contributions of Razia Sultan (1236-1240 A.D.), Rani Durgawati, Begum Samru, Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi and many more. Razia Sultan's meritorious character has been highlighted by Minhaj Siraj, a contemporary male historian in *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*, who writes, "she was endowed with all the admirable attributes and qualifications necessary for kings, but her sex was her greatest disqualification." Similarly, Abul Fazl's assessment of Rani Durgawati is no less significant than any brave man, able commander and sovereign power. In *Akbarnama*, he writes, "The sovereignty of that country (Gadha-Katanga) had come to a woman named Durgawati, who was generally known as the Rani. She was distinguished for courage, counsel and munificence, and by virtue of these elect qualities she had brought the whole of that country under her sway. I have heard from experienced men who had been there that 23,000 cultivated villages were in her possession, and that in 12,000 of these she had resident governors. The remained were subordinate to her, and their headmen were under her control." Further, *Abul Fazl* writes, "She was a good shot with gun and arrow, and continually went on hunting, and shot animals of the chase with her gun. It was her custom that whenever she heard that a tiger had made his appearance she did not drink water till she had shot him."

On religious front too, one is inspired by the presence of well known female figures, like Mira Bai, Lalde of Kashmir etc. who were no less competent than their male Sant and Sufi counterparts of medieval times. But gender bias is visibly present and men folk are not ready to provide them equal status. This attitude obviously frustrated sensitive women. This kind of frustration is manifested in Tarabai Shinde's writings where she came out heavily against male chauvinism. She writes in her autobiography¹ that laws were enacted by male and were for the benefit for their ilk. Because of the works of feminist scholars put the women's role in historical framework and brought it out to the readers. So one understands the role of women in historical perspective. So obviously, religion and related sphere also got attention. And scholars are trying

¹ *A Comparison Between Women and Men* (1881)

to evaluate women's contribution in this sphere too. Scholars tried to analyse the role of religion – whether this is source of empowerment or source of subordination for women? One senses the frustration, anger and helplessness of Tarabai Shinde while going through her autobiography *A Comparison between Women and Men*.² She is angry with the attitude of religious bigwigs towards women.

Here, I will analyse the role of Sufi women as well as their contribution to the society, one can gauge that they were equally empowered in the sphere of spiritual knowledge, and their social actions had powerful impact on the society.

One of the significant features of Islam is Sufism which played immensely important and positive role in the society. With uttering of the word *Sufi*, male dominated institution comes at fore, Documented history also projects Sufism as an exclusively male bastion, women have been referred as disciples or devotees. Miracles have been associated with male Sufis and women are overawed with these miracles.

But modern scholars are engaged in micro level studies which have revealed the new aspects of Sufism. Archives have played most important role in unearthing the new facts. If Archives had not taken care of preserving the documents, new history writing might have never seen the light of the day.

In Islamic World, a large number of Women Sufi saints are found, but very few scholars have been attracted towards these works. In this context Abu Abdur Rahman Muhammad Ibn al-Husain as Sulami's work *Dhikr ul Niswa al Mutaabbidat as Sufiyat* on Sufi Women is of immense value. This is a rare manuscript. Sufis of later period have referred this manuscript in their subsequent works. *al Jami*, referring this work, writes that "al-Sulami wrote a book in which he has mentioned the status of worshipful women and female Gnostics."

This manuscript was discovered by Mahmud Muhammad at Tanahi in Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyad's (Saudi Arabia) library in 1991. Before this discovery, scholars had presumed that this manuscript had been lost or destroyed. This manuscript is a rare example

² Originally in Marathi, translated into English by Rosalind O Hanalon.

of 11th Century Arabic Calligraphy. One gets to know the family background of the author whose mother belonged to a very important Sulami family of Nishapur, and the author had taken the title Sulami from his maternal grandfather which was a common practice then. Ruth Roded in *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Sa'ad to who's who* has called it "Semi matrilineal ascriptions".

Dhikr ul Niswa al Mutaabbidat as Sufiyat contains total 84 biographies of women saints belonging to 8th – 11th century. Though there are total eighty four biographies, but three biographies are repeated. The anecdotes of these women reflect their insight, devotion, state of ecstasy, piety, sincerity and above all, fear of God. Majority of the women mentioned in the book hail from Iraq and Khurasan (part of modern Iraq). The reason may be that the author himself came from Nishapur, a town of academic repute in Khurasan. This manuscript is in Arabic and begins with the biographical sketch of Rabia al Adwaiya, the most prominent woman Sufi saint. Most of these Sufi women were married. Some of these were engaged in trade. Hukayma, Rabia bint Ismail, Athaya were among some prominent female Sufis who were independently wealthy and were engaged in philanthropy. Meaning of Hukayma is Dear philosopher / Dear sage. Some among them were teachers whom *Sulami* calls *ustad*, such as: Hukayma of Damascus, Fatema of Nishapur etc. Lubaba al Mutabida of Damasucs was expert in Fiqh al Ibadat. Similarly, *Dhu an Nun al Misri* addresses Fatema of Nishapur as "My (male) teacher (ustadhi)".

Men as well as women were the disciples of these female Sufis. They used to interact with them over personal issues as well as religious matters. There are evidences when these female Sufis showed greater understanding than male Sufis over matters related to Sufi doctrines, Quran, Islamic spirituality etc. These female saints used to educate their male colleagues over Sufi practices and doctrines. Rabia used to give spiritual advice to scholars. She was specialist in *fiqh-al ibadat*. Her disciple Maryam of Basra used to lecture on love, i.e. mysticism and even died while lecturing.

This manuscript is example of reflecting gender issues. Female Sufis are seen criticizing even their male teachers, as-Sulami has mentioned the criticism of Shaikh Abu al-Qasim Ibrahim al Nasrabadi by his female disciple Umme al Husain al Qureshia. During one of his lectures she

snubs by saying, “How fine are your words and how ugly are your morals?” When Narrabadi told her to keep quiet, she retorted, “you first keep quiet until I calm down.” Similarly, Fatima bint Ahmad al Hajafiyyah told Abul Abbas al-Dinawar who was speaking about affection, “You described it in a marvelous manner but your yourself are away from it.”

On one side we see the freedom of criticism of even well established male Sufis by their female disciples, on the other side one experiences the biases as well. If a woman was virtuous and exceptionally competent, she was given the rank of honorary man. Farid ud din Attar comments on the virtues of Bibi Fatemah Sam “when a woman is a man on the path of the Lord Most High, she cannot be called a Woman”. He also observed that when darweshes prayed to God, invoking Him in the name of virtuous men and women, first of all they mentioned the virtuous women as they were very few. Further, he remarked, “If a lion comes out of the jungle, nobody bothers about its being male or female. This means that human beings, whether male or female, were to be known because of their being righteous and devoted to Allah.”³ *Jami* also praises Rabia, considering her a true man or man of God and writes about her thus,

“If all women were like, the one we have mentioned then women would be preferred to men for the feminine gender is no shame for the Sun nor is the masculine gender an honour for the Crescent Moon”.

Abu Hafs said, “I did not like conversing with women until I met Umm Ali, the wife of Ahmad bin Khazrawaih, then I came to know that Allah places his awareness where he likes.” Abu Yazid used to say that anyone who wishes to enter mysticism, should enter with the velour of Umm Ali or should acquire the same condition like her.

Similarly, Fakhrawayh bint Ali’s (of Nishapur) husband used to say, “Whatever I gained from the companionship of Fakhrawayh was not less than the gain I earned from the companionship of Abu Usman.”

³ Fawaid al Fuad, compiled by Amir Hasan Sijzi, Fr. Ziya-ul-Hasan Faruqi, Delhi, 1996, pp. 100-101

Ayesha bint Ahmad al-Taweel, of Abdul Wahid al-Sayyari used to give monetary help to poor people. Once she was told that a certain man did not accept help commenting that the acceptance of a woman's help is a disgrace. She said, "If a man desires honour in his state of servitude, then there is still the element of arrogance in him." Similarly, Fatima al Nishapuriah of Khurasan sent a gift to Zul Noon which he returned by saying that it is disgrace and damage to accept gift from a woman, she retorted by saying that "there is no one wiser than a sufi who look at the source."

Sheikh Nizamuddin had also talked about virtue and chastity of women. He talked about Bibi Fatimah Sam of Indrapat for whom Shaikh Farid ud-din remarked that she was really a man sent to this world in the form of a woman.⁴

About Fatima al Nishapuriah, Ibn Malool, a very old man said that he had not seen a person more honoured than a woman named Fatima al Nishapuriah who was in Mecca. She used to speak on the understanding of Quran.

This manuscript is very significant as it has included Sufi women's those sayings also which other contemporary scholars view as heretic utterances of female Sufis.

Sufi women were freely mixing up with male Sufis, used to travel long distances to get education and got positions of authority, enjoying respect among male Sufi colleagues. Umm Ali bint Abdullah bin Hamshadh was highly placed in mysticism. The senior saints revered her and recognized her status.

Anecdotes also reflect the attitude of men considering women as weaker sex and resistance by women. There is famous anecdote in regard of Rabia al Adwaiya, a resident of Basra who used to spend whole night in worship. Once she started her journey to perform Haj after having a mule for her luggage. Her mule died on the way in a Jungle. Her companions offered to carry her luggage but she snubbed them by saying that she did not start her journey with the intention of taking their help, she could do very well without them. The companion left,

⁴ Fawaid al Fuad, compiled by Amir Hasan Ala Sijzi Dehlawi, English tr. Ziya-ul-Hasan Faruqi, Delhi, 1996.

after that she carried and complained to the God that he invited her to come to his house and now has left her out alone in the jungle, immediately her mule came to life and she started towards Mecca. Later on, people saw the same mule on sale in a market.

There are many miracles attributed to Rabia, but one can safely presume that she was exceptionally intelligent and even men were recognized it. Sheikh Fariduddin Attar writes that when a woman behaves like a man and brave in religious matters, she should not be called a woman.

Similarly, for Hafsa bint Sirin, sister of Muhammad ibn Sirin, as Sulami recounts the story of a lamp that Hafs used to lit her lamp while praying in the night. Even after the lamp extinguished, the house would remain lit until dawn.⁵ For Ajradah al-Ammiyah of Basra, Jafar bin Sulaiman told that he heard from his mother and other ladies that Ajradah⁶ did not break her fast for sixty years and did not sleep in the night except during the early part of it.

Similarly, Dara Shukuh's *Safinat ul Auliya* is also considered an important source to study Sufism, but very few scholars know that it contains biographies of 40 female Sufis, which throw a significant light on aspects of gender relations. How women are seen is also known from these biographies. Many anecdotes showing closeness of Sufi women to God and their respect among male Sufis are being included in these biographies. For example –

About Hazrat Tuhfa, Shaikh Sari Mustafa narrates that I saw a beautiful lady with hands and feet tied in a hospital. Seeing me, she recited a few couplets crying at the same time. People said that she had lost her mental balance, but she retorted by saying that my only sin is that I love the Almighty. Sheikh took her seriously and requested the owner of the hospital to set her free. In between her owner reached there, Shaikh Sari asked him why had he made her prisoner. He told that he used to feel that as she possessed many qualities so he thought that he will be able to earn lot of money. She sings very well. Sheikh offered him money in lieu of her freedom. Though he had no money at all. Whole night he kept on praying. In the early morning, a stranger brought gold. When the Shaikh offered money to the owner, he refused to accept it and said, in

⁵ Biography 21

⁶ Biography 25

the name of God, I have freed her. Tuhfa went from there crying. Then Shaikh Sari and the owner reached Mecca, there they saw Tuhfa who had become very weak, she fell near *Kaba* and died there. The owner also died there. In the whole discourse, Tuhfa has been shown leading independent life like any other male Sufi.

Shemeen Burney Abbas in *The female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India* writes that, “Whether or not the Sufi poets were ‘feminists’ cannot be claimed... as the term ‘feminist’ is a fairly recent one. However, the female myths in Sufi poetry certainly represent the voices of marginalized groups and continue to be used as representative frames even today.”

One feels that if such type of information comes into light, a new perspective to the gender history can emerge. For women, generally it is said that as they fail to achieve their proper place in the society, so they lean towards religion as a protest. For example, Mira Bai was voicing against patriarchal feudal society and emerged completely in Lord Krishna worship. There are many women saints who followed the footsteps of Mira Bai.

So to know more about women, one finds new sources very significant. In this light, I have tried to see the role of female Sufis from gender perspective. New information, new sources, new perspectives are helping to construct new gender history.

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