

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SUFISM

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### ABSTRACT

Sufism as a religious trend was developed attracting the attention of many people from various social strata. Its popularity was due to the truth it pursued; a truth sought by the unconscious mind of all human beings. It was harmonious with religious beliefs hence it put no limit on women turning to it in contrast with other political and social trends. Therefore, women took this opportunity to play a role in it in various ways.

Their role was not limited to turning to Sufism yet it was manifested in various forms, e.g. offering gifts to Sufis, sympathizing with them, criticizing them, and narrating their miraculous actions. Such actions on the part of women reflects their attitude toward Sufism. The present article aims at considering the role of women in and attitude toward Sufism.

**Key Words:** Woman, Sufism, belief, negation, Sufi's wife, Sufi's sister.

### Introduction

Women as society members and men's life partner have played a major role in the development of Sufism. Although their role has been minor as compared to that of men but their attitude toward and treatment with Sufism has had a considerable impact on its history. Despite their primary role in the family as a wife and mother they were aware of the fact that Sufism is a trend which may create an eye-catching history of its own. Therefore, they managed to set aside the limits imposed on them by the society and played a major role in Sufism in various ways, e.g. taking part in Sufis' sessions, narrating their miraculous actions, affecting them and even opposing their views.

### The Role of Women in the Life of Sufis

Sufis' outlook on life is quite different from that of ordinary men. Some of them abandoned their family and undertook a journey to reside

in sacred places such as Mecca in order to get rid of worldly concerns and devote themselves to God. Women, as their life partner, acted differently in reaction to them some instances of which will be elaborated on below.

It is said that once Ahmad Yazid Kateb was passing through Sari Soqati's session with his servants. Hearing Sheikh's voice, Ahmad entered the session. At the moment Sheikh was saying, "Human being is the weakest creature in the existing 18000 worlds but at the same time he is the most rebellious creature against God. However, good-doers and benefactors are even superior to angels". Such comments brought about a revolution in Ahmad to the point that he left the city and dwelt in deserts. Some days later his mother came to Sheikh and told him the story. Sheikh told her that her son has made a repentance of his sins and promised to inform her whenever he returned and did so. Ahmad's mother, wife and son came to him and asked Ahmad to come back home but he refused to do so. Finally, his wife asked him to take his son too. Ahmad changed the boy's fine clothes and made him put on woolen ones. The woman felt pity for her son and took him back. When leaving, Ahmad told his wife that she was allowed to get her divorce (Attar, 1991, p.289).

In this story, Ahmad's wife tries to dissuade him from going by mediating their son but then feels pity for the son and accepts to keep him with herself. Finally, Ahmad leaves his family and his sole favor is to allow his wife to get divorced.

Another instance is the story of Ibrahim Adham. Turning to Sufism, he abandoned his wife and son. Some years later, his son enquired his mother about his father. She told him the story. Then, they went to Mecca to find Ibrahim. There Ibrahim saw his son and recognized him, embraced him and asked him of his religion and ability to recite the Holy Qur'an. The son answered that he was a Muslim and could recite the Qur'an. When Ibrahim was to leave, his wife and son asked him to stay with them. Ibrahim addressed God saying, "O, my God! Help me. If my son makes me far from you, let me or him to die". At the moment, the son died. (Attar, 1991, p. 95-7).

The gist of the story is that when Ibrahim abandoned his family, his wife bore the responsibility of the family and trained a nice boy and taught him to recite Qur'an. In fact, unless she made a sacrifice, Ibrahim could not leave his family or his son would not be so trained. Now, after years the woman goes to Mecca to visit her husband and the result is that she loses her son too. Actually she suffers a great damage because of her husband

being a Sufi.

In another case, when Fazil 'Ayyaz turned to Sufism, told his wife, "I'm going to Mecca. You are free to do whatever you want". His wife answered, "I never leave you alone and I'll follow you to wherever you go"(Attar, 1991: pp. 81-82).

The way these Sufis treated their families is quite the same all of whom preferred Sufism to their family. However, 'Ayyaz's wife acted differently and played a much impressive role in the life of his husband not leaving him alone, abandoning her family and relatives to follow her husband.

As it was pointed out, not all Sufis were lucky enough to be accompanied by their wife and in some cases the Sufis themselves preferred to live alone because of the difficulties they would face in their new way of life.

Women acted differently in reaction to acts of worship and asceticism on the part of their husband. For example, on the eve of Ramadan, Abu Obeid Bosri asked his wife to lock the door of his room and give him a slice of bread every night. 30 days later she opened the door and found 30 bread there untouched.(Ansari, 1983, p. 296).Although it seems an imaginary story but the fact is that some Sufis underwent severe asceticism during which they left their families alone and made their wife to bear the responsibility of making a living.

However, some women complained about such behavior of their husband. For instance, when Habib A'jami endowed all his property and built a place to worship in, his wife asked him to go and work to make a living. He answered that he will be paid ten days later where he works. It is said that ten days later he was granted a great favor by God (Samarqandi, 1974, p. 223).

In this story, his wife is not to be blamed since Sufis were given some food by others and it was their family suffering numerous problems and even according to Abu Soleiman Darani Sufis enjoyed hunger (Attar, 1991, pp. 68-72).

Women as sisters also had an influence on the life of Sufis. Some Sufis related their mystical mood to their sisters. For example, when Ali Roodbari was dying, told his sister, "Fatemeh! Now the doors of heaven are opened, the paradise is decorated and houris are telling me that all these is provided for me. But I say, 'O, my God! I'm not proud pf paradise and houris but if you look at me once, it would be the best paradise for me'"(Meibodi, 1959,

p.469). This story shows that the sister of Abu Ali was a good addressee for him and able to understand his mystical mood.

In another case , one night Boshir Hafi came to his sister and told her, "I'm going to the roof". He went upstairs and remained there until the next morning. In the morning, his sister asked him the reason. He answered, "I was thinking there are a lot of creatures in Baqdad to be called human being. Some are Jewish and some are Christian. I was wondering what is the reason that they have not been accepted by God but me as a Muslim am so granted with my God"(Attar, 1991, p.112).

Sisters were not only their brothers addressee but also their companion. For instance, Boshir considered his sister, Mozqe, as his true companion and when she died said, "I have read in a book if a worshipper fails to do his duty properly, God makes him apart of his companion. I am afraid lest I have failed in worshipping God so losing my sister" (E'temad-al-Saltane, 1925, p.88).

There were cases in which the comments and behavior of women affected Sufis deeply. For instance, when Sari Soqati Went to Rabe'e Shami to receive her advices, Rabe'e told him that if he wanted to keep awake for a long time he had to be far from unlawful things and if he wanted to live in comfort he had to feel satisfied with what God has provided for him. Sari never forgot such comments(Ibn-e Jouzi, 1986, p. 29). There are other cases in which Rabe'e has affected her contemporary Sufis.

Sometimes warning by women had a great impact on men. Once Abu Obeid Qasem was lying in front of Ka'ba. 'Ayeshe Makki asked him, "Have you seen anybody lying as such in front of kings? Aren't you afraid to be neglected by God?"(Samarqandi, 1973, p.121).

Such effects have not been limited to Sufi women yet ordinary women made some men aware of their faults too and sometimes made them turn to Sufism. For instance, once Ali Mahan was passing a place with a number of his servants. Some body asked, "Who is he?" and a woman answered, "He is a man abandoned by God suffering a great disaster". Hearing this, Ali Mahan gave up his post(Qosheiri, 1973, p.145).

Hasan Basri repented of his sins due to the behavior of an ordinary women too. According to Abu Nasr Samarqandi, Hasan Basri was a handsome young man putting on fine clothes. Once he saw a beautiful woman and pursued her. The woman asked him, "why do you pursue me? Don't you fear from God?" but he didn't care and pursued her again. The

women repeated her question and he said, “because of your eyes”. Then the women brought her eyes out and gave them to Hasan saying, “I do not want eyes for which someone forgets God”. Hasan was deeply shocked and thought, “While a woman is devoted to God as such, why shouldn’t I be? Then he repented of his sins (Samarqandi, 1973, pp. 46-7).

Although this story is imaginary reveals that Sufis have acknowledged the fact that women could affect men deeply.

The attitude of the society towards Sufis has been effective in forming the mentality of women about Sufism. It is said that once Abu Soleiman Radani went to Iraq. There he asked for some water. A girl gave him some and asked him, “Do Sufis drink water during the day?” Such a comment reveals the viewpoint of people who thought that Sufis are always fast.

### **The Influence of Sufis on Women, Family, and Society**

Sufis had a considerable impact on women making them familiar with Sufism to the point that their behavior made their family members turn to Sufism.

Children growing up in such a family were also familiar with Sufi doctrines. For instance, it is said that once Mohammad Ibn Ali Qassar’s daughter shouted, “O, my God! I want some grapes.” Her father told his friends that he has trained his children such to ask every thing of God.(Abu Nasr Seraj, 2001, p. 335).

In another case, the daughter of Yahya Ibn Ma’az Razi asked something of her mother. The mother told her to ask it of God. She answered, “I feel ashamed to ask worldly things of my God. Whatever you give me is that of God, too (Hajviri, 1979, p. 470).

There were cases in which Sufis’ wife turned to Sufism. For example, once Abu Abdollah Roodbari went to one of his disciple’s home and found it locked. He opened it , sold all its goods and bought some food. After a while, his disciple returned home but couldn’t say anything. His wife saw a woolen carpet there and gave him to Sheikh to be sold. Her husband asked her the reason and she answered, “We can not disobey Sheikh”(Qosheiri, 1975, p. 407).

Obedience to Sheikh is one of the primary doctrines of Sufism respected here by the woman.

Sufis behavior could attract everybody even criminals and evil-doers. There have been some women who were evil-doer at first and then repented

of their sins under the impact of some Sufis. It is said that once Sheikh Abu Sa'id and his companions saw a singer in bazaar. Sheikh recited a piece of poetry which meant, "You come to bazaar using make-up and decorated. Aren't you afraid to go astray and be captured?" this comment influenced the woman to the point that she went to a mosque, endowed all her jewelry to Sheikh disciple and repented of her sins and after a while entered the realm of Sufism(Ibn Monavar, 1988, p. 232).

Another instance is related to Sha'vane, a musician woman holding all parties and mourning sessions in the city. Once she heard some crying and asked one of her maidservants to go and see who has held a session without her permission. The maidservant went and did not return for a long time. She sent another one and she did so too. Finally Sha'vane went out and saw Saleh Mari preaching. At the moment Sheikh was reciting this verse of the Holy Qur'an, "They will hear the noise of its furious breathing: Al-Forqan/12", describing the features of the hell. Sha'vane was deeply affected and asked Sheikh if God accepted her repentance. Sheikh answered "God is merciful and compassionate and will do so". Then she repented of her sins and made her servants free and turned to a pious woman(Samarqandi, 1973, p. 45-49).

Sin another case, an evil-doer woman came to Maulana to repent of her sins and following her all her servants repented too. Maulana encouraged them to be able to overcome their worldly desires (Aflaki, 1959, p. 555).

### **The Belief of Women in Sufis**

The attitude of women toward Sufism led to various reactions on their part. Some women turned to Sufism and some of them respected them offering some gifts to them. For instance, once a woman was to offer a hen to Sheikh Roozbehani. On the other hand, a woman told her friend, "Sheikh does not care eating lawful or unlawful things. I want to test him" so stole a hen, roasted it and offered it to Sheikh. After a while they heard a woman shouting, "My hen was stolen". They told her it doesn't worth shouting as such and she answered I hope the thief stole ten other hens instead of that one since it belonged to Sheikh. Hearing this, they came to Sheikh and pardoned him(Roozbehan Qoli, 1995, p. 43).

However, rich women offered more valuable gifts to Sufis. For example, a woman influenced by Banan Hammal sent him a maidservant to show her respect to him(Qosheiri, 1975, p. 275).

In some cases, women provided some food for Sufis. For instance, when Zon-Nun was imprisoned, a woman sent him some food but he didn't eat it. She asked him the reason while he knew it was lawful and the product of the woman labor. He answered because it was given to him in a dish of an oppressor by the jailer(Qazzali, 1940, p. 294).

Such instances reveal the high status of Sufis in the society and the positive attitude of people in general and women in particular toward them.

Some women expressed their respect paying off Sufis debt selling their dowry. As it is said, Yahya Ma'az Razi owed somebody 300000 Dirhams. One night he had a dream of the Prophet Mohammad (saw) telling him to go to Khorasan and find a woman who pays his debt. He went to Hirat and held a session retelling his dream. The daughter of the ruler asserted that she had the same dream and was going to pay his debt selling her dowry if Sheikh held a session of preaching there(Attar, 1995, p. 324).

The story shows that Sufism was so widely spread that even the daughter of a ruler was interested in it. She sold her personal property to pay the debt of a Sufi and only asked him to hold a session and preach. It means that women could do whatever they wanted with their possessions, as it was seen in the case of the gifts offered by women to Sufis.

Another case is that of Sheikh Ahmad Jam's son who was caught in the poverty trap. Borhan-al-Din Nasr came to his father and asked for some assistance. Sheikh went to where he lived and held a preaching session. At the end of the session Sheikh said, "I won't leave here before paying the debt of my son". At the moment Abul-Fath Dehqan decided to give the money he had to Sheikh but kept quiet because he was afraid lest his wife disagreed. Then, Ibrahim Vali, the ruler, came there and promised to pay the debt. When he returned home, his wife told him that she was to pay it using her father's inheritance. Sheikh accepted the gift of both of them. When Abul-Fath Dehqan went home, his wife asked him to give their money to Sheikh. He went to Sheikh and related the story. Sheikh told him, "Your wife acted as such for the sake of us and you were making a mistake thinking she would disagree" (Qaznavi, 1961, p. 75-77).

In other cases women expressed their respect for Sufis asking them to pray for them. For instance, a woman came to Joneid and asked him to pray for her son to return home. Joneid asked her to have patience. After three days the woman returned and said that she couldn't wait anymore.

Sheikh told her to go home and see her son. The woman did so and finding her son at home went to Sheikh and expressed her gratitude to him (Attar, 1991, p. 375). Such instances reflect the positive attitude of women toward Sufis. Similar instances have been related about Habib A'jami (Attar, 1991, p.57).

In another case, an ill woman sent his son to Ahmad Ibn Hanbal to pray for her recovery. It is said when the boy returned home found his mother healthy (Attar, 1991, p. 228).

Maulana has been the most popular Sufi with women. As his disciples relate he was favored by peoples of any religion (Aflaki, 1959, p.49).

Fatemeh khatoon, the wife of Sultan Valid, was under the supervision of Maulana from her childhood. She loved him very much and after his death was so restless that never went to even visit her son, Amir 'Aref. One night she had a dream of Maulana telling her, "if you are upset for the sake of me, find me in Amir 'Aref". It is said that after that Khatoon lived in comfort and rest (Aflaki, 1959, p. 833).

Tavoos Khatoon was another devotee of Maulana. Once she invited him to her home and played the lyre for him. Maulana praised her art and gave her a part of his turban. The same day, Sharaf-ud-Din married her. When she was asked what made treasurer to marry her, she answered, "the attention of Maulana to me" (Aflaki, 1959, p. 375).

Fakhr-al-Nesa Khatoon was a pious woman devoted to Maulana. Once she went to Maulana to ask for his permission for going to Mecca and visiting Ka'ba. Before saying even one word, Maulana told her, "It is a nice intention. I wish to accompany you in it". She spent that night at Maulana's home. At night, Maulana went to the roof and said his prayer there. Then, he asked Khatoon to go there. She did so. Maulana asked her to look at the sky and she saw Ka'ba there. She fell in the ground in faint and gaining her consciousness, changed her mind (Aflaki, 1959, p.288).

Another devotee of Maulana was Gorji Khatoon, the wife of Mo'in-ud-Din Parvane. When she wanted to take a journey asked a painter to draw a picture of Maulana for her. The painter draw Maulana face several times and surprisingly each time it was different from the previous one. He sent all the pictures to khatoon and she looked at them whenever she missed Maulana (Aflaki, 1959, p. 425).

Another instance of women's respect for Sufis is the narration of their miraculous actions.



Wives have been the best tellers of such actions. They retold the actions of Sufis some of which will be mentioned below.

The wife of Abu-Abdullah Troqbadi says, “one year people suffered a severe famine. Abu-Abdullah came home and told me how we could have some wheat while peoples are suffering wheat. Then, he distributed the wheat among people. He was always in faint unless the prayer time in which he came to consciousness”(Qosheiri, 1975, p.103).

The wife of Sheikh Ahmad Jam, the mother of Borhan-ud-Din Nasr, says, “Once I asked Sheikh for a silken clothes. He told me that he was a Sufi putting on woolen clothes and I should do so. I insisted saying every body said Sufis may turn soil into gold. He answered it was so easy for God. Then, he took some sugar in his hands and turned it into gold”(Qaznavi, 1961, p. 84).

The same story has been narrated by the sister of Sheikh(Qaznavi, 1961, p.84).

The book “Maqamat-e Ahmad Jam” contains a number of such exaggerated stories and according to Heshmatullah Mo’ayed, such stories do not give us an attractive picture of Sufis(Zhende-pil, 1961, p. 34). They reflect the dream people had of a person solving their problems, curing their diseases and killing the oppressors by a curse. It is also the result of the exaggerated comments of Sufis’ family members.

Actions of Maulana have been related by women more than other Sufis because of his popularity with and respect for women. Kara Khatoon, his wife, relates “One night I didn’t find Maulana at home. I went to bed and after a while saw him saying prayer with dusty legs. I asked him the story and he answered that he had gone to Hijaz to visit one of his disciples. Then he gave me some stones of Hijaz. I sent a number of them to Gorji Khatoon, his disciple, and it made her more and more devoted to Maulana(Aflaki, 1059, p. 262-263).

In another case, Kara khatoon says, “Once in the winter, six men came to Maulana and Shams giving him a bunch of flowers. They said their prayer and left. After a while, Maulana came to me and gave me some flowers. He said that they were sent by angels of God from India and are curing. I sent some to Gorji Khatoon to cure her eyes”(Aflaki, 1959, p. 91).

Sa’ide Gomaj Khatoon, the wife of Rokn-ud-Din and the disciple of Maulana, relates, “Once I was sitting somewhere with my friends. Suddenly

Maulana came there and asked us to leave the room. We did so and at the moment the roof collapsed”(Aflaki, 1959, p. 33).

It has to be noted that some times women respected one Sufi and criticized another one. For instance, a woman living near the monastery of Sheikh Abu-Sa'id Abul-Kheir never took part in his sessions but went to that of Abu-al-Qasem Qosheiri. When she was asked why she did so she answered, “It is not my own will. I have not understood Sheikh Abu-Sa'id but Sheikh Qosheiri(Ibn Monavar, 1986, p. 215).

The wife of Abu-al Hasan Kharqani did not believe in her husband. Once Abu-Ali Sina and his disciples went to Kharqan and asked her where her husband was. She answered, “He has gone to the desert. it is a pity you look for him because he is a mad and disgraced man”. The disciples decided to return but Abu-Ali Sina stopped them. They went to the desert and found Sheikh there putting some firewood on the back of a lion. Sheikh understood that his wife's comments had made them mistrustful on him and told them, “A lion never carries the load of Sheikh unless he carries the load of ordinary people” (Kharqani, 1990, p. 88). When Abu Sa'id came to Kharqan, the wife of Sheikh asked him to pray for her son. He answered, “In the presence of Sheikh Abu-al Hasan, there is no need to my prayer” (Kharqani, 1970, p. 92). Also, during the time Abu Sa'id spent in Sheikh home, his wife was always in ill manner. Once Abu Sa'id asked a servant to tell her, “Is there any time you be in good manner?” It is said that since then the woman never disputed with her husband (Kharqani, 1970, p. 95).

Such a story reveals the extent to which the wife of Abul Hasan was devoted to Sheik Abu Sa'id but not her own husband. On the other hand, another woman prefers to take part in the sessions held by Abul Qasem but not those of Abu Sa'id because she asserts that, “I have understood Sheikh Abul Qasem but not Sheikh Abu Sa'id” (Ibn Monavar, 1989, p. 215).

Therefore, Sufis were both favored and criticized by women. There were some women annoying them like an old woman who lived near the monastery of Sheikh Abu Sa'id and always made a lot of noises to annoy him and his disciples(Ibn Monavar, 1989, p. 211).

However, the attitude of the society toward Sufis affected people too. For instance, when Hallaj was tortured an old woman said, “Hit him more not to make such statements again”(Attar, 1991, p. 517).

In fact, Hallaj was accused of heresy since nobody could understand what he said. Such an attitude on the part of the society led the old woman to make such comments.

Sometimes the manner and behavior of the Sufis themselves resulted in such a negative attitude. For instance, Hallaj and some other Sufis' comments and behavior made the society pessimistic about Sufism and even led people to call Malek Dinar a hypocrite (Qosheiri, 1975, p.396).

### **Conclusion**

The role of women in the development of Sufism has not been bound to turning to it but women as wives, sisters, and daughters assisted men and their comments and behavior had a considerable impact on them.

Such women helped their husband in training their children and also bearing the responsibilities of the family during the time they were devoted to long worships and asceticism. Such actions on the part of women were a clear sign of their sacrifice in this realm. However, there were few women who complained about their husband's actions but as it was said they were very few. Sufis often left their family alone to perform the acts of worshipping not caring for their family members.

Women as sisters played a major role in the life of Sufis, too. They were good addressees and companions for them and provided assistance for them whenever needed.

The women showed their respect for Sufis in various ways, e.g. offering gifts, and paying their debt even if it resulted in their own poverty. They also asked Sufis to pray for them showing their full trust in them.

Such a positive attitude toward Sufis led women to narrate the miraculous actions of Sufis; however, such stories have been mostly narrated about Maulana due to his popularity with women. He attached a lot of importance to women and did not differentiate between men and women in the realm of Sufism. So during his time, a lot of women turned to Sufism and performed its rituals in monasteries. In fact, he developed the role of women in Sufism.

It has to be noted that women never committed blind obedience to Sufis yet they turned to Sufism willfully.

Sufi women as well as ordinary women influenced men deeply. It is said that Rabe'e had a considerable impact on many of her contemporary men. However, such an effect was mutual and men affected women too. Even some of them affected evil-doer women such that they repented and even turned to Sufism.

In a nutshell, women as a member of the society as well as a member of the family played a major role in Sufism, directly and indirectly, and expressed their attitude toward Sufism in various ways.

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