



Representation of Women in Sufism Literature: A Comparative Study of the Thought of Rabī'ah al-'Adawiyah and Sa'diyya Shaikh

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Abstract

The study of Sufism in the Islamic tradition is often dominated by an androcentric perspective that places women's spiritual experiences as peripheral and subordinate, thus obscuring women's position as autonomous religious subjects. The lack of comparative studies across periods that dialogue classical female Sufi figures with contemporary feminist Sufi thinkers indicates a significant research gap in the study of Sufism and gender. This study aims to comparatively analyze the representation of women in Sufism through the figure of Rabī'ah al-'Adawiyah and the Sufi-feminist thought of Sa'diyya Shaikh, and formulate its theoretical implications for the development of a gender-just Sufi epistemology. The study employs qualitative methods with a comparative-hermeneutical approach, utilizing textual analysis of primary and secondary sources, including classical Sufi hagiography, Sufi works, and contemporary writings by Sa'diyya Shaikh, within a critical and feminist hermeneutic framework. The results of the study show that Rabī'ah al-'Adawiyah represents women as independent spiritual subjects through the concept of *maḥabbah Ilāhiyyah*, which rejects transactional relations between humans and God and transcends gender categories and social hierarchies. Meanwhile, Sa'diyya Shaikh reconstructs Sufism as a space of liberating ethics through the hermeneutics of spiritual justice, by emphasizing the egalitarian relationship between God and humans as the basis for gender equality. A comparative analysis reveals the continuity of spiritual values, as well as differences in epistemic strategies, in responding to patriarchal structures across various

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historical contexts. This study concludes that the synthesis of both thoughts offers an inclusive Sufism paradigm that emphasizes women's contributions in the formation of Islamic spiritual epistemology and broadens the horizon of contemporary Sufism studies that are gender-just.

Keywords: Rabi'ah al-'Adawiyah; Sa'diyya Shaikh; Sufism; Feminist Hermeneutics; Spiritual Justice

Abstrak

Kajian tasawuf dalam tradisi Islam kerap didominasi oleh perspektif andro-sentris yang menempatkan pengalaman spiritual perempuan sebagai perifer dan subordinatif, sehingga mengaburkan posisi perempuan sebagai subjek religius yang otonom. Minimnya kajian komparatif lintas periode yang mendialogkan figur sufistik perempuan klasik dengan pemikir sufisme feminis kontemporer menunjukkan adanya celah penelitian yang signifikan dalam studi tasawuf dan gender. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis secara komparatif representasi perempuan dalam tasawuf melalui figur Rabi'ah al-'Adawiyah dan pemikiran sufistik-feminis Sa'diyya Shaikh, serta merumuskan implikasi teoretisnya bagi pengembangan epistemologi tasawuf berkeadilan gender. Penelitian menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan komparatif-hermeneutis, melalui analisis tekstual terhadap sumber primer dan sekunder, termasuk hagiografi tasawuf klasik, karya-karya sufi, serta tulisan kontemporer Sa'diyya Shaikh, dengan kerangka hermeneutika kritis dan feminis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Rabi'ah al-'Adawiyah merepresentasikan perempuan sebagai subjek spiritual yang mandiri melalui konsep *maḥabbah ilāhiyyah* yang menolak relasi transaksional antara manusia dan Tuhan serta melampaui kategori gender dan hierarki sosial. Sementara itu, Sa'diyya Shaikh merekonstruksi tasawuf sebagai ruang etika pembebasan melalui hermeneutika keadilan spiritual, dengan menegaskan relasi egaliter antara Tuhan dan manusia sebagai dasar kesetaraan gender. Analisis komparatif memperlihatkan kesinambungan nilai spiritual sekaligus perbedaan strategi epistemik dalam merespons struktur patriarki lintas konteks historis. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa sintesis pemikiran keduanya menawarkan paradigma tasawuf inklusif yang menegaskan kontribusi perempuan dalam pembentukan epistemologi spiritual Islam serta memperluas horizon kajian tasawuf kontemporer yang berkeadilan gender.

Kata Kunci: Rabi'ah al-'Adawiyah; Sa'diyya Shaikh; Tasawuf; Hermeneutika feminis; Keadilan Spiritual

Introduction

Sufism is one of the most influential intellectual and spiritual traditions in Islam, shaping ethical orientation, mystical experiences, and humanity's existential relationship with God (Hidayat & Syahrul, 2017). Since the early period of Islam, Sufism has evolved as a path of self-purification, emphasizing divine love, spiritual equality, and inner transformation that transcends social, ethnic, and gender distinctions (Hegazy, 2021). However, the scholarly construction of Sufism documented in the classical canon exhibits significant representational inequalities. The dominance of male figures such as al-Qushayrī, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn 'Arabī in Sufism reference works is disproportionately offset by the lack of explicit recognition of women's spiritual experiences and authority. This imbalance reveals a disparity between the universal principles of Sufism and the epistemological practices that inform its historical narrative.

Historical evidence shows that women's presence in Sufism is often reduced to aesthetic symbols and spiritual metaphors, rather than positioned as autonomous subjects of mystical knowledge (Hentschel, 2025). Classical Sufi literature typically portrays women as symbols of love, tenderness, or objects of mystical longing, while their voices are rarely articulated as independent spiritual authorities (Milad & Taheri, 2021). This pattern is inseparable from the patriarchal structures that shape the production of Islamic knowledge broadly. Sa'diyya Shaikh (2023) shows that classical Islamic religious traditions often internalize gender-based power relations, marginalizing women's spiritual experiences from interpretive spaces. This reality confirms that the problem of women's representation in Sufism is structural and has a direct impact on how Islamic spirituality is transmitted and understood to this day.

The feminist hermeneutic approach developed by Sa'diyya Shaikh (2023) provides an analytical framework for uncovering masculine bias in Sufi texts while simultaneously restoring women's spiritual experiences as a legitimate and productive source of religious knowledge. Meanwhile, the spiritual practice of Rabī'ah al-'Adawiyah exemplifies a form of mystical experience that rejects the gender hierarchy by centering all religious relations on pure love for God, without regard for social or symbolic calculations (Idoko, 2024). A trans-historical comparison between Rabī'ah as an early spiritual practitioner and Shaikh as a contemporary interpreter is crucial for exploring the mechanisms of women's representation as well as the epistemological transformation of Sufism from mystical praxis to gender-conscious theoretical articulation.

Several previous studies have paved the way for this discourse, but they still leave significant theoretical gaps. Suraiya (2024) confirms the presence of women in the early history of Sufism, but stops at historical mapping without analyzing epistemological representations. Ramli (2021) presents Rabī'ah as an icon of divine love, but fails to connect her to the issue of gender equality as a structure of knowledge. Iqbal (2023) offers a framework for gender-just religious reading, but does not specifically apply it to Sufism. Hentschel (2025) develops a feminist hermeneutic of spiritual texts, but focuses on methodology without comparing Sufi figures across eras. Rofiah, Nikmatullah, and Mufidah (2024) emphasize the reconstruction of Islamic epistemology based on women's experiences, but fail to position Rabī'ah as the starting point for non-patriarchal Sufi praxis. The absence of studies directly comparing Rabī'ah and Shaikh as two historical and epistemological nodes highlights the unfilled research gap.

Based on this gap, this study formulates the main question: how can the representation of women in the Sufism tradition be reinterpreted through a comparison between the spirituality of Rabī'ah al-'Adawiyah and the Sufi-feminist hermeneutics of Sa'diyya Shaikh? This study aims to construct a new understanding of women's position as spiritual and epistemic subjects in Sufism. The basic argument of the study asserts that Rabī'ah's spirituality of love contains

emancipatory potential that can be conceptually rearticulated through Shaikh's feminist hermeneutics. The study's contribution is expected to enrich Sufism theory with a gender perspective, broaden the scope of Sufism studies as a legitimate epistemological arena, and provide a theoretical foundation for the development of an inclusive and equitable Islamic spirituality, both in academic discourse and contemporary religious practice.

Method

This research is a qualitative study grounded in a literature review employing a hermeneutic-comparative approach, informed by contextual-critical hermeneutics, to analyze the representation of women in the Sufi tradition. The primary data of the research includes hagiographic texts and classical Sufi literature that record the narratives and thoughts of Rabī'ah al-'Adawiyah, such as the works of Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār and Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī, as well as the theoretical works of Sa'diyya Shaikh, especially *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, which is positioned as a representation of contemporary Sufism and gender discourse. Secondary data includes Sufi interpretations, Islamic gender studies, and relevant previous research, with source selection based on academic authority, thematic relevance, and scientific contribution. Data collection techniques are carried out through the identification, selection, and documentation of texts based on units of analysis, such as concepts, metaphors, and narratives, related to women's spirituality. Data analysis employs thematic content analysis, combined with hermeneutic reading, including theme coding, contextual interpretation, thematic comparison between figures, and conceptual synthesis, to reveal the continuity and discontinuity in the construction of a more equal and inclusive female spirituality within the Sufism tradition.

Results and Discussion

Women's Spirituality: The Perspective of Rabī'ah al-'Adawiyah

The spirituality of Rabī'ah al-'Adawiyah in the classical Sufi tradition is primarily reconstructed through the hagiographic narrative compiled by Farīd al-Dīn al-'Aṭṭār (2009) in *Taẓkirah al-Awliyā'*. As a Sufi-biographical text, this work cannot be treated as a factual historical chronicle, but rather as a discursive representation that frames Rabī'ah as an authoritative figure in the spiritual imagination of early Islam. Through this narrative, Rabī'ah is represented as a spiritual subject who gains legitimacy not through scholarly institutions or social authority, but through the intensity of mystical experience and consistent asceticism. In this context, Rabī'ah's spirituality not only embodies individual piety but also serves as a model of female representation that transcends the limitations of normative gender roles in 8th-century CE religious discourse (Qibtiyah, Hasanah, & Hidayati, 2024).

The central concept associated with Rabī'ah is *maḥabbah llāhiyyah*, namely an orientation of worship that is entirely based on love for God, without instrumental motivation in the form of reward or punishment (Mustamin, 2020). In this framework, divine love is not merely a psychological emotion, but rather an ontological orientation of consciousness that directs all human existence toward God as the ultimate goal. Rabī'ah's rejection of the logic of reward and punishment represents an epistemological shift in early Sufism, from normative obedience to existential relations (Muhajirin & Soleh, 2023). This shift is important in the reading of gender because it allows women to emerge as autonomous spiritual subjects who do not depend on structural or symbolic legitimacy that is generally monopolized by men.

Within the framework of classical Sufism, Rabī'ah's school of thought is closely intertwined with the concept of *ma'rifah*, which refers to intuitive knowledge derived from an existential closeness to God (Schimmel, 1975). This relationship between love and knowledge highlights that the spiritual path is not defined by biological sex, but rather by the readiness of consciousness to relinquish ego and worldly interests. The claim of the universality of the spirit in the Sufi tradition is not intended to negate the social experience of gender, but rather to emphasize that human spiritual capacity is non-gendered (Azriel, 2024). Thus, Rabī'ah's representation does not simply position women as a special exception but as evidence that the spiritual structure of Islam allows women to reach the highest mystical station equally.

Rabī'ah's asceticism, including her decision to remain celibate, should be understood as an expression of theological consistency, rather than a normative rejection of social institutions. Within a representational framework, this asceticism functions as a symbolic strategy for establishing spiritual authority that is independent of patronage relations and patriarchal hierarchies (Idoko, 2024). However, Rabī'ah's independence cannot be generalized as a social condition of women at the time, but rather as a discursive construction that demonstrates the possibility of women's spiritual agency within the constraints of existing social structures.

Rabī'ah's legitimacy within the classical Sufi canon is reinforced by the recognition of Sufi scholars such as al-Qushayrī (1998) and al-Sarrāj (2007), who position her as a pioneer of the concept of *maḥabbah*. This recognition is not merely biographical, but reflects a mechanism of representation through which female figures are incorporated into male-dominated structures of spiritual authority. However, this legitimacy still requires a critical reading, as narratives about Rabī'ah are shaped through the perspectives of male authors who determine how women's spiritual experiences are codified and transmitted. By reading these sources reflectively, Rabī'ah can be understood not simply as an object of glorification but as

a spiritual subject whose existence challenges the boundaries of gender representation in classical Sufism.

The symbolism of fire in Rabī'ah's utterances serves as a metaphor for the purification of consciousness from worldly attachments and dual interests. Fire symbolizes not only emotional intensity but also an ontological transformation that scorches the self's orientation toward anything other than God (Vlasov, 2025). Rabī'ah's prayers, which reject heaven and hell as motivations for worship, represent a radical, non-instrumental spiritual ethic (Suraiya, 2024). In the context of women's representations, this symbolism illustrates how mystical language enables women to convey spiritual authority without resorting to formal legal or theological discourse.

Overall, the spirituality of Rabī'ah al-'Adawiyyah represents a Sufi paradigm that positions divine love as the foundation of human relations with God and as a space for articulating women's spiritual agency. This representation is not revolutionary in a socio-political sense, but it is significant epistemologically because it shifts the boundaries of who can be an authoritative subject in Islamic mystical experience. This framework provides an important foundation for comparative analysis with the thought of Sa'diyya Shaikh, who reconstructs women's Sufi spirituality through a critical hermeneutic approach in a modern context.

Sufi Hermeneutics and Gender Reconstruction: Sa'diyya Shaikh's Perspective

The Sufi hermeneutics developed by Sa'diyya Shaikh is rooted in a critical reading of Ibn 'Arabī's concept of *waḥdat al-Wujūd*, which he understands not merely as a metaphysical doctrine of the unity of existence, but as an ontological framework that necessitates the spiritual equality of all human beings (Shaikh, 2012). Within this framework, the unity of being is not operationalized as a cosmological abstraction, but rather as a hermeneutical principle for reassessing hierarchical relations within religious traditions, particularly those related to gender. Through an exploration of the concepts of *rūḥ insāniyyah* and *tajallī llāhi*, Shaikh shows that the essence of humanity in Ibn 'Arabī's Sufism is not attached to biological sex, but to the spiritual capacity of humans to receive divine manifestations (Shaikh, 2012). Thus, the claim that mystical experience is equally accessible to women is not an ideological assumption, but rather the result of an ontological reading of the fundamental structure of human creation, as formulated in Sufi cosmology (Shaikh, 2022).

This hermeneutical approach allows Shaikh to challenge traditional assumptions that position women's spirituality as derived from or subordinate to male authority. She does not simply add women as objects of study in Sufi discourse, but rather positions women as epistemic subjects with the full capacity to experience, interpret, and articulate mystical experiences (Shaikh, 2012). At this point, Shaikh's hermeneutics works deconstructively by revealing that the limitations on women's spiritual agency stem not from the structure of Sufism itself,

but from the androcentric layers of interpretation attached to classical Sufi texts (Shaikh, 2012).

This reconstruction is further developed in Sufi Narratives of Intimacy, in which Shaikh formulates the concept of intimacy as a direct and reciprocal relationship between humans and God. This intimacy is not understood as a mere emotional metaphor, but rather as a relational structure that eliminates gender hierarchy in the encounter with the Divine (Shaikh, 2012). Unlike classical Sufi narratives that often objectify feminine figures as passive symbols of divine love, Shaikh reinterprets Sufi symbols—such as love, beauty, and union—as a hermeneutic space that recognizes the female body and experience as legitimate media for spiritual enlightenment (Shaikh, 2023). Thus, the body is not reduced to an aesthetic symbol, but is recognized as the locus of religious experience that shapes knowledge of God.

Within this framework, Shaikh consciously integrates the dimensions of inner experience with critical feminist awareness. She rejects the dualism between rationality and spirituality that has long been embedded in the tradition of interpretation, as this separation narrows the scope of understanding religious texts (Shaikh, 2012). Her Sufi hermeneutics positions spiritual experience as a valid source of knowledge, yet remains open to critical reflection and rational dialogue. This approach enables a reading of Sufi texts that is not confined to mystical subjectivism, nor subject to logical positivism, which excludes women's experiences from the structure of religious knowledge.

Shaikh's interpretive strategy of Ibn 'Arabi's texts demonstrates that the multi-layered Sufi interpretation—*ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*—is not simply an esoteric method, but rather a transformative process with ethical implications. The inner layer is not positioned as a secret meaning detached from social reality, but as a horizon of consciousness that leads to the recognition of spiritual equality and moral responsibility for gender justice (Shaikh, 2012). By reading concepts such as *insān kāmīl* and *ma'rīfah* in an existential sense, Shaikh connects mystical experience with contemporary ethical demands, so that Sufism is not confined to individual spirituality, but contributes to the transformation of more just social relations (Shaikh, 2012).

Historical awareness is a crucial element in Shaikh's hermeneutics. She asserts that religious texts, including classical Sufi works, never emerged in a social vacuum but were instead shaped by specific cultural contexts and power structures. Therefore, Sufi hermeneutics serves as a means of deconstructing the androcentric assumptions embedded in interpretive traditions (Shaikh, 2012). However, this deconstruction does not lead to a rejection of tradition, but rather to a critical and responsible rereading. Women's experiences—including the body, affection, and intuition—are positioned as legitimate epistemic instruments for knowing God, without falling into biological essentialism.

Shaikh's primary contribution lies in his success in broadening the epistemological horizons of Sufism by asserting that spiritual truth is participatory and cannot be monopolized by one gender or interpretive authority. However, this approach also presents challenges, particularly regarding the risk of subjectivizing mystical experience if not balanced with rigorous hermeneutical discipline. By remaining grounded in the dialogue between text, knowledge, and ethics, Shaikh's thinking demonstrates that Sufism has great potential as a relevant theological framework for the struggle for gender equality without losing its spiritual depth and continuity with the classical tradition.

Comparative Analysis of Women's Representation: Perspective of Rabī'ah al-'Adawiyah and Sa'diyya Shaikh

This comparative analysis is built on three main criteria: epistemological differences, ontological implications for the female spiritual subject, and strategies for representing spiritual equality within the Sufi tradition. Within this framework, Rabī'ah and Shaikh are not simply placed side by side as two distinct figures. Still, they are instead analyzed dialogically to assess how mystical experience and hermeneutical reflection shape two distinct epistemic pathways in affirming women's spiritual autonomy.

Epistemologically, Rabī'ah represents spiritual knowledge derived from direct experience with God, whose validity is independent of textual authority or institutional legitimacy (Kaharu & Santalia, 2024). This knowledge is intuitive, existential, and personal, affirming women's spiritual equality through the practice of divine love that negates social and biological hierarchies. In contrast, Shaikh (2012) constructs spiritual knowledge through hermeneutical work on classical Sufi texts, particularly the thought of Ibn 'Arabī, to dismantle the patriarchal epistemological assumptions embedded in the interpretive tradition. This distinction demonstrates that spiritual equality can be established through both direct mystical experience and systematic conceptual articulation, although both operate within different epistemic regimes.

These epistemological differences have direct implications for how both represent the female subject in Sufism. In Rabī'ah, the female subject is presented as an autonomous individual who attains the highest spiritual station through total surrender to God, without negotiation with dominant social structures or religious discourses. This representation is existential-individual and asserts that women's spiritual experience does not require male mediation or religious authority. Shaikh, on the other hand, represents the female subject as an epistemic agent entitled to interpret and produce religious meaning. Through a gender-sensitive Sufi hermeneutic, she extends spiritual autonomy into the structural realm by challenging the way texts are understood and institutionalized.

Ontologically, both converge on the affirmation of the unity of Divine reality, but take different lines of argumentation. Rabī'ah interprets love for God as a path of

existential unification that erases all profane identities, including gender, so that the spiritual subject is understood solely as a spirit facing God (Qibtiyah et al., 2024). Shaikh (2012) interprets the concept of *wahdat al-Wujūd* as an ontological framework that rejects the hierarchy of being, including the hierarchy of gender, by asserting that all existence is a manifestation of Divine unity. This comparison shows that the experience of unification and ontological reflection are not in a hierarchical relationship, but rather offer two different ways to affirm gender neutrality at the deepest level of reality.

These differing approaches also yield distinct strategies for affirming equality. Rabī'ah asserted equality through practical proof, demonstrating that women are indeed capable of attaining the highest spiritual intensity (Seedat, 2022). This strategy is symbolically powerful, but it does not directly intervene in the structures of knowledge that limit women. Shaikh complements these limitations with discursive strategies that target the epistemological and linguistic foundations of gender exclusion within the Islamic scholarly tradition (Rahman, Majid, & Rahman, 2025). Thus, Rabī'ah's experience demonstrates the existential possibility of equality, while Shaikh's framework provides a conceptual language to explain, defend, and reproduce this possibility within academic spaces.

The relationship between the two cannot be understood as a historical legitimization of one party over the other, but rather as a conceptual reconstruction across time. Rabī'ah's spiritual experience serves as a source of normative inspiration, demonstrating the reality of spiritual equality. In contrast, Shaikh's reading serves as a contemporary theoretical articulation that renders that experience amenable to a systematic and critical reading. In this context, Shaikh's hermeneutics is not an anachronistic projection of Rabī'ah, but rather a conceptual attempt to explain the meaning of women's mystical experience within a modern epistemological framework.

The integration of these two approaches demonstrates that Sufism offers a flexible epistemic space for affirming women's spiritual autonomy. Rabī'ah's approach affirms existential freedom through the experience of total divine love, while Shaikh's approach affirms intellectual freedom through a critical reading of texts and traditions. Both complement each other in demonstrating that spiritual equality is not only a personal experience but also a construction of academically justifiable knowledge. Thus, this comparative analysis indicates that the differences between Rabī'ah and Shaikh lie in means, not ends. Both affirm that the soul has no gender and that the path to God is open to every human being without biological or social boundaries.

Conclusion

The representation of women in Sufism literature, as reflected in the thought of Rabī'ah al-'Adawiyah and Sa'diyya Shaikh, demonstrates substantive spiritual equality, albeit constructed through different epistemological frameworks. Rabī'ah

represents women as universal spiritual subjects through the experience of Divine love that transcends gender identity. At the same time, Sa'diyya Shaikh reaffirms this position through a hermeneutic-feminist reading of Sufism texts and traditions to uncover internalized patriarchal biases. These findings have theoretical implications for expanding the epistemology of Sufism as a field of knowledge that is not only mystical but also reflective, critical, and open to gender perspectives. They provide a conceptual basis for the development of more inclusive contemporary Sufism and Islamic studies, particularly in academic and higher education contexts. The limitations of this study lie in its reliance on entirely textual data and a limited focus on figures, thereby failing to capture the broader historical and social dynamics in women's Sufi practices. Therefore, further research is recommended to explore female Sufi figures from different geographical contexts and periods and integrate historical, sociological, and anthropological approaches to enrich the understanding of the representation of women in Sufism.

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Author Contribution Statement

GP contributed to the formulation of the research concept and design, development of the theoretical framework, coordination of writing, and correspondence of the manuscript. GF contributed to data collection, literature review, and the preparation of the methodology section. AS contributed to data analysis, deepening the conceptual framework, and drafting the discussion. M was involved in interpreting the findings, refining the argumentation, and editing the substance of the manuscript. RM contributed to the writing of the introduction and conclusion sections, ensuring consistency of argumentation, and conducted a final review of the manuscript. All authors read, provided critical feedback, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest, either financial or non-financial, that influenced the writing, analysis, or publication of this manuscript.

AI Usage Statement

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) in this manuscript was limited to language enhancement, grammar correction, and formatting assistance. All research findings, concepts, analyses, ideas, and conclusions are solely the work and responsibility of the author and were not generated by AI.

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