

# Women of Light in Sufism

by Sachiko Murata

It is a common error to imagine that Sufism is a mystical movement that has little to do with the Islamic religion. Many Orientalists held this view in the past, but most recent scholarship has rejected the idea. At the same time, many Muslims, unfamiliar with the history of their own religion, or confused about what the word "Sufism" means, have also taken the position that Sufism does not belong to authentic Islam.

I cannot take the time now to explain the numerous reasons for maintaining that Sufism has been an essential part of the Islamic tradition from its origin, that is, from the time that the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad in the seventh century. Let me simply say that the Qur'an itself employs a series of words that designate the primary concerns of the Sufi teachers over the centuries. These words include love, sincerity, mercy, compassion, kindness, remembrance, helpfulness, and acting beautifully. All of these words designate human qualities that are highly praised and encouraged by the Qur'an. and they are qualities that the Sufi teachers have recognized as the fruit of sincere and proper observance of Islamic teachings and practices.

Instead of trying to explain here how the Quran encourages the acquisition of these human qualities, I refer you to the book *The Vision of Islam*<sup>[2]</sup> in which I and my co-author have explained in detail how the Qur'an is the fountainhead of all Islamic practices, theological doctrines, and ethical, moral, and spiritual teaching. We also explain how and why it is that among the great Muslim teachers, it is the Sufis who focus on the most interior dimension of the religion, that is, love, sincerity, and spirituality.

As for the question of the feminine principle, let me first say that I have written a rather long book, *The Tao of Islam*,<sup>[3]</sup> explaining how femininity and masculinity play essential roles in the Muslim conceptualization of God, the cosmos and the human soul. The basic point of the book is perhaps that, according to a fundamental theological teaching of Islam, God's mercy is His primary attribute, and His wrath and rigor remain subservient to His mercy. Mercy, compassion, and love designate God's very self, and these essential attributes rule the universe and direct the destinies of human beings.

When this divine mercy is discussed in theological works, it is typically described in terms that are closely associated with the concept of the

feminine. It is enough here to point out that the Arabic word for "mercy," *rahma*, is practically identical with the word for "womb", *rahm*. God's mercy is the nurturing womb that creates, preserves, and protects all creatures and ultimately leads them to a state of permanent happiness.

Here I want to discuss another side to the feminine reality, and that is its connection with the reality of "light," which is one of the important Qur'anic names of God. According to the Qur'an, "God is the light of the heavens and the earth." What I would like to suggest is why femininity is essentially luminous, why, in other words, it reflects directly the divine light that fills the universe. In short I want to talk about what can be called "the light of woman" and how women – and men as women become "women of light."

Let me begin by quoting one of the most famous Sufis of history, Râbi'a, a saint who died sometime in the eighth century, that is, in the second century of Islam. Râbi'a has been widely recognized as one of the most significant early figures of Islamic history, and several books about her have appeared in Western languages. Her sayings are often quoted by the Sufis, and she is universally respected as one of the greatest spiritual teachers of the early tradition. One of the shortest of the many sayings that have come down from her is this: "Everything has a fruit, and the fruit of recognition is coming forward to God. "

This short saying summarizes the wisdom of Sufism. It also alludes to the "light of woman." However, in order to see how so much teaching is packed into so few words, we need to look at the saying closely and reflect on various references that it makes to the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet.

Let me begin with the word "recognition" (*ma'rifa*). What does Râbi'a mean when she uses this word in the sentence, "the fruit of recognition is coming forward to God"? The Arabic word is commonly translated as "knowledge" or "gnosis", but, especially in verbal form, it is more likely to mean "recognition", that is, to recall knowledge. We can derive some help in understanding what Rabi'a means from a saying of Muhammad that Sufis constantly cite in their works. It is usually translated, "He who knows himself knows his Lord," or "has known his Lord." I would rather translate it. "He who recognizes himself has recognized his Lord." I understand the saying to mean that all those who truly come to know themselves and who truly recall the knowledge that they have of their true selves will truly have come to recognize God.

When Râbi'a said, "the fruit of recognition is coming forward to God," she certainly had this prophetic saying in mind. She meant by "recognition" true knowledge and awareness of self and God. As for "coming forward" (*iqbâl*), she undoubtedly had in view the use of this word in the Quran. Probably the best way to understand its significance is to look at story of Moses and the Burning Bush. The Qur'an tells us that Moses became frightened after he threw down his staff and it turned into a serpent. God said to him, "O Moses, *come forward* and do not fear. Surely you are among the secure"(28:31).

In short, by using the word "come forward " Râbi'a is suggesting that those who recognize God will come forward to Him, be embraced by Him, and be delivered from fear. Once they have been released from fear, they will be secure. Then they will be among those whom the Qur'an calls the *awliyâ'* or "friends" of God: "Surely God's friends – no fear shall be upon them, nor shall they sorrow" (10:62).

A second saying of the Prophet provides more context for Râbi'a's saying. In fact, I am reasonably sure that she is simply restating this prophetic saying in different language. The Prophet said. "Knowledge without practice is a tree without fruit." When Râbi'a said. "Everything has a fruit, and the fruit of recognition is coming forward to God," she is speaking of the knowledge and practice that were mapped out by the Qur'an, the Prophet, and his companions. The goal of all religious knowledge is to recognize God, and the goal of all practice is to go forward to God, to find Him, to become His friend, and to live in security from fear. The right practice is to imitate the Prophet by following the *Shariah* (the revealed law) and observing the *Sunna*, the exemplary model that he set down during his life.

In short, Râbi'a is saying that by commanding people to seek knowledge, the Qur'an and the Prophet are telling them to search out and recognize God in themselves and in all things and to achieve full awareness of what they are recognizing; and, by commanding them to practice, they are telling them to go forward sincerely to God and to turn away from the distractions of this world. This, I submit, is practically a definition of Sufism, because it designates the one-pointed concentration on God that all true Sufis have tried to achieve, a concentration that combines both understanding the true nature of things and appropriate activity.

Let me now turn to the question of "light." It needs to be said at the outset that in the Islamic tradition, and even more so in the focused version of this tradition known as Sufism, nothing can be understood if it is not situated in relation to God. God is the Reality that gives rise to the universe, and He is the absolute point of reference. If we do not understand how something is

related to this Ultimate Reality, we will not have understood it. Or rather, we will not have *recognized* it for what it is. Once we do "recognize" what it is, this will demand "coming forward to God." as Râbi'a tells us.

In Islamic terms, there are two basic ways of understanding, or two basic sorts of knowledge. As the Prophet is said to have remarked, "Knowledge is two – knowledge of the body, and knowledge of the religion." Knowledge of the body is the usual sort of knowledge that we gain through our own means. It allows us to orient ourselves to the world in terms of the world. The other sort of knowledge allows us to orient ourselves in relation to God. The first sort has a temporary usefulness, but after death, it has no use whatsoever. When the Prophet said that knowledge demands practice as its fruit, he was talking about real knowledge of the nature of things and true practice, that is, practice will benefit the human self on a permanent basis, not on a temporary basis. Real benefit and real fruit can only be found by knowing the second type of knowledge, which is knowledge of religion.

If we were to ask Râbi'a or any of the other Sufis about "women of light", they would begin by talking about light from the viewpoint of the knowledge, of religion. They would tell us not to be so concerned about the knowledge of the body that keeps us occupied with our own prejudices about society and psychology, and our own concepts like "justice" and "equality. " They would tell us that if we want to understand women, or if we want to understand men, we need to ask God to allow us to recognize ourselves and our Lord. We should pray to God in the words of Muhammad, "O God, show us things as they are." All human beings, both women and men. have the same goal in life. It is to know the supreme Light and to become illuminated by it.

To recognize the supreme light, people need to recognise themselves. They have to know who they are and how they are situated in relation to Ultimate Reality. "Whoso recognizes *himself* recognizes his Lord." In order to recognize God as Light, they need to recognize themselves as light. In a famous prayer, the Prophet said,

*O God, place in my heart a light, in my hearing a light, in my eyesight a light, on my right hand a light, on my left hand a light, before me a light, behind me a light, above me a light, below me a light, and make me into a light.*

In this prayer, the Prophet is asking God to show him the light that he possesses in himself because he was created by the Supreme Light. Only when we find light in ourselves can we recognize God as Light.

Let me come back to the issue of "woman." What is it that establishes a relationship between woman and light such that we might speak of "women of light"? In Sufi terms, such a woman would be someone who has been so transformed by knowledge and practice that God has given her a light in her heart. In her hearing, in her eyesight, and so on. God has, in short, "made her into a light."

One way to understand what "women" are is to conceptualize them in terms of their opposites. Thus women can be understood in terms of men, and men can be understood in terms of women. What are the contrasting qualities and attributes that make us distinguish women from men?

As a general rule, Islamic thinking understands masculinity as a quality of activity, control, authority, domination, strength, power, and greatness. Femininity manifests the complementary qualities – receptivity, acquiescence, submission, surrender, weakness, giving in, letting go, lowness.

When God is understood in contrast with the world, typically He is pictured in terms of masculine attributes, because He is omnipotent and has total control over all things. In contrast, when the world is pictured in relation to God, it is understood in terms of feminine qualities, because it has nothing but receptivity. It can have no activity of its own. It can only receive from God. This is not to say that it has no activity, but it is to say that it achieves activity through gaining the activities of the Lord, who is the only true Actor. When God's creatures receive the Lord's activity and are aware of their reception, then they can be His perfect servants, acting as God wants them to act.

Of course, God in himself has both masculine and feminine qualities. He is masculine in terms of being the Wrathful, the Severe, the Powerful, the Slayer, the Abaser. He is feminine in terms of being the Merciful, the Gentle, the Receptive, the Life-giver, the Exalter.

Just as God is described in terms of a polarity of masculine and feminine attributes, so also the universe is often depicted in male/female terms. Heaven is up, dominant, controlling, and masculine. Earth is down, subservient, accepting, and feminine.

Many passages could be cited from Sufi works that describe the universe as a series of contrasting pairs arranged in a hierarchy from God down to the world. In these depictions, the higher and controlling attribute is pictured as masculine, and the lower and receptive attribute is pictured as feminine.

But, the gender of a thing is not fixed, because it changes depending on whether we view it as receptive to the higher or active toward the lower (e.g., heaven is feminine in relation to God, but masculine in relation to earth).

In the same way, Islamic psychological teachings – which are descriptions of the whole and healthy human being – employ masculine and feminine imagery to describe the nature of the human self. The self or soul is understood as comprised of several levels, each of which has a proper relationship with the other levels. Commonly, the self is described as a microcosm mirroring the vertical structure of the macrocosm.

When the soul is understood as a hierarchy of levels, its highest level is the intellect, and the intellect, in Islamic terms, is a "light." The Prophet said, "The first thing that God created was my light," and he also said, "The first thing that God created was the Intellect." The Sufis call this first light the "First Intellect" and "the Muhammadan Reality", and they consider it the prototype of both the universe and the individual soul, both the macrocosm and the microcosm. The parallel with the Christian doctrine of the *logos* has often been noted.

When the Prophet asked God to "make him into a light," he was asking God to make the light of the highest level of his being, the intellect, dominate over all the lower levels of his being, including his body. When he asked God to place a light in his heart, in his eyesight, in his hearing and in all his bodily members, he was asking God to disclose to him the essential light of his own reality, which was the first thing created by God. The Prophet is showing other human beings, who were created from the same essential light, that they can only reach the perfection of themselves and truly recognize themselves if the hidden light of their own essence, flows out from the center and overcomes their darkness.

Another famous prophetic saying can suggest something of the nature of the light that the Prophet asked God to shine down upon him. This is the saying that explains what happens when the servant performs all the duties of servanthood by recognizing his or her own slavehood to God. When the servant comes forward to God by practicing as God has asked him or her to practice, this calls down God's love. In this *hadith*, the Prophet tells us that God says, "When I love My servant, I am his hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he grasps, and his foot with which he walks." Remember that the speaker of these words is God, the Light of the heavens and the earth. When God loves His servant, the servant is infused with God's light. When God infuses the servant with His loving

light, the servant hears with God's light, sees with God's light, walks in God's light, and grasps with God's light. In other words, God has placed a light in his eyes, a light in his ears, a light in all his bodily parts, and has made him into a light.

In order to understand the nature of light, we need to think a bit about light's opposite, which is darkness. The Light of lights is God, and light is intelligence, awareness, and the source of all perception and understanding. It follows that "darkness" is the absence of God, the absence of intelligence, and the absence of perception and understanding. However, nothing can be totally absent from God or from these qualities, or else it would not exist. This means that God's only opposite is nonbeing itself, which does not exist. So, God has no opposite. In other words, there is no such thing as "absolute darkness." However, there is such a thing as "absolute light," and that is God.

If there is no absolute darkness there is still plenty of "relative darkness." All of us experience relative darkness most of the time. It is the ignorance, unawareness, unconsciousness, stupidity, ugliness, and evil that are so obvious in ourselves and others.

I have suggested what a "woman of light" might be, but can we also speak of "women of darkness"? Of course we can. There is no guarantee that a woman – or a man – will display the divine luminosity. In Islamic terms, to talk of "women of darkness" would be to discuss receptivity to evil, or the quality of acquiescence where it does not belong. Receptivity toward light is good, but receptivity toward darkness is the source of all ignorance and ugliness.

In brief, I do not wish to suggest that Islamic thought understands the feminine principle as necessarily luminous. In essence it is luminous, but it can also be perverted and darkened. So also, the masculine principle is essentially luminous, but it also can be perverted and distorted.

If we consider feminine and masculine in terms of the usual criteria, that is, in terms of the "science of the body," then we will see that both male and female can be good or evil depending on the standards we choose to make our judgments. It all depends on our chosen criteria. On this level, after all, everything is an obscure mixture of light and darkness, with no standards to distinguish between real light and real darkness.

However, the Sufis prefer to consider feminine and masculine in terms of the "science of religion," or in terms of true *recognition*. Then they can speak of

good and evil, or light and darkness, in real terms. From this point of view, the light of woman appears in all those things in the universe that manifest the light of God through their submission to God's creative activity. In this respect, all things are luminous women, because all things have surrendered to God and serve as His slaves. To be a slave to God is to be a woman before God. When the world is understood simply as God's creature, there are no women of darkness, because everything is a sign of God, a manifestation of God's creative power.

On the human level, however, we need to distinguish between "women of light" and "women of darkness." Women of light are those human beings, male or female, who freely submit themselves to God's teachings and ways. Women of darkness are those human beings, male or female, who freely submit themselves to anything that pulls them away from God.

By using the word "submission" here, I have in mind the Arabic word *islâm*. In the Qur'an there are two basic types of *muslims*, that is, two basic types of creatures who are submitted to God. In one respect, all things in creation are *muslims*, because all of them are His creatures. The Qur'an says, "To God has submitted [*islâm*] everything in the heavens and the earth" (3:83). In another respect, the only creatures who deserve to be called *muslims* are those human beings who have freely submitted themselves to God by following one of the 124,000 prophets whom God has sent to the human race.

Thus, in Qur'anic terms, to be a true *muslim* is to submit oneself freely to God and to have receptivity toward God's guiding light. The first thing that is demanded of someone who wants to be a true *muslim* is to accept freely and joyfully that one is a "woman" in the sense that I am using the word. One cannot be fully human without surrendering oneself to God, which is to say that one cannot be fully human without actualizing the light of femininity. By surrendering oneself to God, one "comes forward" to God and turns away from all the darkness of femininity, which rises up when one comes forward to the world instead of to God.

Viewed in terms of their created nature, all human beings are first "feminine" before having any other qualities, which is to say that they are first surrendered and submitted to God's creative command. Like all other things, they have come to God as slaves and they obey Him absolutely. Difficulties arise in our human situation when we fail to see that we are by nature women. Or, our problems stem from pretending to be men when we are in fact women. In relation to God, all human beings must choose to be women.



The way to do so is to recognize our own receptive and created nature for what it is.

Once we feminize our feminine nature, then we will have recognized our Lord's mastery and authority. Thus we can understand the *hadith* of recognizing self to mean the following: "Whoso recognizes the femininity of his own self has recognized the masculinity of the Lord. " Whoso knows that he or she is truly a woman has understood that God is the source of all power and authority and that God alone truly deserves to be called "lord," "master," and "man."

As my final remark, let me go back to the saying of Râbi'a with which I began. "Everything has a fruit," she said, "and the fruit of recognition is coming forward to God. " Râbi'a is simply saying that when people recognize themselves for what they truly are, they will have no choice but to come forward to God, because God is the source of their selves and all things. They will have no choice but to surrender to God willingly. By doing so, each of them, whether male or female, will become a woman of light.

## NOTES

- [1.](#) Revised version of a paper presented in November 1999 at the Congreso Internacional sobre Mística Femenina "Mujeres de Luz" Avila, Spain, and subsequently published in Spanish as "La luz de la mujer: el principio femenino en el sufismo. ' Translated by J. K. Calderón. Mujeres de luz. Edited by Pablo Beneito. Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2001, pp. 267-79.
- [2.](#) *The Vision of Islam: Reflecting the Hadith of Gabriel* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1994), co-authored by William C. Chittick and Sachiko Murata.
- [3.](#) *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook On gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (New York, state University Of New York, 1992) by Sachiko Murata.