

Book Reviews

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Rabi'a From Narrative to Myth: The Many Faces of Islam's Most Famous Woman Saint, Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya

Rkia Elaroui Cornell

London: Oneworld Academic, 2019.

402 + xiv Pages.

Ever since Margaret Smith (d. 1970) published *Rabi'a the Mystic A.D. 717-801 and Her Fellow Saints in Islam* almost a century ago, Rabi'a has remained a figure of abiding interest in the study of Islam in the West. For Muslims, she has often embodied the archetype of the selfless lover of God, the devotee whose sole desire is neither to be saved from Hell nor to be granted Paradise, but to receive the Beloved's acceptance.¹

Yet, how many of the stories and accounts of Rabi'a that have been recorded and repeated for more than a millennium of Islamic history actually took place? How much of what has been bequeathed to us about her by countless generations is historically accurate? This is one the guiding aims of the book: to disentangle, as much as possible, the "real" Rabi'a from the one of legend and lore. In this archival endeavor, which involved closely scrutinizing more primary sources than any other study on her thus far, Rkia Cornell left virtually no stone unturned. And in the process of doing so, she produced a theoretically rich 400+ page tome, not only on Rabi'a, but also on the unfolding and development of early Islamic ascetical, mystical and theological history.

The book is divided into six chapters in each of which Cornell examines, in considerable depth, different “tropes” about the Muslim saint. There is Rabi’a (1) the teacher, (2) the ascetic, (3) the lover, (4) and the Sufi, not to mention (5) the religious icon, and (6) more recently, the secular icon. Some of these, argues Cornell, are close to the historical Rabi’a (1, 2 and 4, and to some extent 3) while the others are largely literary constructions. The combination of them, particular the first four, helped create a master narrative about her that came to form an important part of the cultural memory of Islam. This narrative was a combination of history and myth. Or to be more precise, the historical seeds helped produce a larger-than-life myth. While Cornell does not go so far as Mircea Eliade, who inverted the existentialist prioritization of existence over essence by proposing that myths are more “real” than history, being archetypes that govern it, for Cornell they are not mere fictions either, untruths of no real consequence. Instead, they have profound effects on shaping and molding the consciousness of a civilization and therefore warrant the attention of the scholar, provided they are approached through the appropriate tools.

On the historiographical front, Cornell wishes to avoid two extremes. One is to uncritically accept the hagiographical narratives about Rabi’a as fact. The other is to take a hyper-skeptical approach to the source material that dismisses everything about her in tradition. Cornell is not willing to go that far, since in her eyes, we do have sufficient evidence to construct at least some idea of who she was. For one thing, we have accounts of her from the 9th century, not long after her death. The earliest of them is found in *Qasd wa al-ruju’ ila Allah (God as the Goal and Return)* by the moral psychologist Muhasibi (d. 857), where he recounts that she would say at nightfall, “The night has come, the darkness has mingled (*ikhtalata al-zalam*), and every lover is left alone with his beloved. Now, I am alone with you, my Beloved” (p. 39). Since he cites her by her full name, he could not have had another Rabi’a in mind (a confusion that does plague some of the early material). No less importantly, Muhasibi was born in 781 CE, twenty years before her death, and spent the early years of his life in Rabi’a’s hometown of Basra. If he had not met her in person, he would at least have heard of her reputation and possibly interacted with those who knew her directly (as Margaret Smith also proposed).

Another important early source is Jahiz (d. 868). She appears in two of his books, *Kitab al-Hayawan (The Book of Animals)* and *Kitab al-bayan wa-l tabyin (Treatise on Demonstrative Proof and Elucidation)* as a woman of eloquence and wisdom. As a native of Basra who was close to her in time and place, it is also not out of the question that he had direct contact with a fledging Rabi’a tradition that traced itself back to the actual person. In Jahiz’s accounts, the quality that stands out most prominently of Rabi’a is of a *mu’addiba*, not simply

a “teacher” in the conventional sense, but as an inspiring and well-spoken guide who instructed her listeners in the art of *adab* (courtesy, propriety, manners, etiquette). For Cornell, this *adab* was not that of the governing elite, which had its roots in Persian and Greek cultural history, but an alternative kind that characterized the mores and ideals of a class (the ‘*ulama*) which Marshall Hodgson identified as the piety-minded. Cornell objects to Hodgson’s view which counterposed their religious vision against that of the partisans of *adab*. Instead, she argues, there were two competing conceptions of it, one religious, the other secular, that formed the broader culture of *adab* during the reign of the Abbasids in which she lived. And this inculcation of *adab*, this *ta’dib*, would have entailed particularly for the piety-minded and those within their orbit, the equivalent (or close equivalent) of what *askesis* or “training” was for the Hellenistic philosophers for whom wisdom was the fruit of a disciplined regimen of catharsis and character formation (p. 79). The acquisition of the character traits or *akhlaq* associated with the Prophet Muhammad, such as forbearance, generosity, sympathy, humility, and renunciation, would have been the goal of the *ta’dib* “that the ‘real’ Rabi’a,” to quote Cornell “would have imparted to her students and associates” (pp. 76–77). (Incidentally, the overlaps between *ta’dib* and *askesis* can be found, as Cornell observes, in a work such as a Kindi’s *On the Means of Dispelling Sorrow*.)

The book is filled with many gems. One of them is the elaborate discussion of Rabi’a’s lineage. For Cornell, the evidence suggests that she was not a former slave or *mawla* but a woman of good social standing who was born and remained free, and who hailed from the Arab clan of ‘Adi b. al-Qays. This is why she was known as al-‘Adawiyya. When some of the texts speak of a Rabi’a al-Qaysiyya (as Jahiz does), they are referring not to a different Rabi’a, but to the same person identified through her tribal rather than clan-based affiliation. Curiously, her tribe, the Banu ‘Adi, was known for having produced great ascetics (p. 74), one of whom was Mu’adha bint ‘Abdullah al-‘Adawiyya (d. 702). Cornell is of the view that pious women congregated in the company of this teacher of Basra, in circles of learning and instruction, and made up a school of female ascetics in the region (p. 125).

The story gets more interesting when we learn that this Mu’adha was in her younger days a companion and handmaiden of the Prophet’s youngest widow ‘A’isha (d. 678), and transmitted some of the hadiths narrated by her (pp. 122–128). When ‘A’isha became involved in the political upheavals that beset the nascent Muslim community following the assassination of the caliph ‘Uthman, she established a political base in Basra shortly before the Battle of the Camel in 656. She also received the unwavering support of the Banu ‘Adi. Following her defeat, she eventually returned to Medina. However, many of her supporters, inspired by her spiritual teachings, remained in Basra, from where Mu’adha

would transmit what she had herself learned from her close relationship with 'A'isha, especially during the last two decades of her life when she became known for her renunciation. While it remains difficult to determine whether this interiorizing ascetic turn was the result of penitential remorse 'A'isha felt for her own involvement in a civil war that ripped the fabric of the early Muslim community apart, or a natural desire to live in closer conformity to the austere ethos of the sunnah as she approached her own end, her mode of piety must have impressed itself on Mu'adha, who passed it on to her own students and disciples. Cornell, to be clear, does not go so far as to explicitly identify 'A'isha as the founder of this Basran circle of female ascetics, but there would have been a clear percolation of her ideas regarding how to best to embody the principles of the spiritual life into it. Cornell's analysis here is fascinating and one wishes she may have pursued the possible 'A'ishian roots of Basra's female ascetics a little more, especially since the concept of *al-zuhd fi al-halal*, or "renouncing the permissible," which was practiced, according to Cornell, by a disciple of Mu'adha (a certain Unaysa bint 'Amr al-'Adawiyya, pp. 127–128), also appears to have been part of the teachings of 'A'isha² (a point Cornell does not raise within the context of her discussion).

As noted, the book is theoretically rich. An illustration of this can be found in the three kinds of asceticism Cornell identifies, a particularly useful classification because there is a tendency in Sufi studies to equate asceticism with *zuhd*, and then to contrast it, somewhat simplistically, with mysticism. For Cornell, we can better understand early Islamic modes of piety by first recognizing "instrumental asceticism." This is a transactional form of religiosity in which the devotee exchanges some goods of this world for others of the next, or for some goal or object of desire. It is largely ego-based or self-centered since God acts as a means for the obtainment of a personal benefit. Then there is "reactionary asceticism" which is essentially a form of social or ethical protest. In early Islam, this would have been sparked by umbrage at the unequal distribution of wealth during the reign of the Umayyads and Abbasids. In a modern context, it might entail something as simple as a hunger strike. Finally, there is "essential asceticism," in which the renunciant leaves the world not out of a contemptuous disdain for it nor because she finds it intrinsically evil, but simply because in the grand scheme of things, it is unimportant, especially in relation to God, who is the supreme object of the essential ascetic's devotion (pp. 126–127, 140–146, 152–153). For Cornell, not only is this third category more congruent with the Qur'anic idea of submission or surrender, but it is also reflective of what we seem to know about the historical Rabi'a.

Another interesting feature of essential asceticism is that it very easily transforms into a mysticism of love, due to the selfless or even self-transcending type of piety it fosters, where the consciousness of the subject dissolves in the

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divine object of affection. Although Rabi'a is usually credited with being the founder of the tradition of love mysticism, according to Cornell, there are clear traces of it not only among her peers, but also her predecessors, some of the accounts of whom can be found in Ibn Junayd's (d. 883–4 CE) *Kitab al-Mahabba li-l-Lah* (*Book of the Love of God*). The work is not only one of the earliest sources of Rabi'a's sayings on love, it also contains aphorisms and pithy remarks on the subject from the time of the earliest generations of Islam (pp. 39, 160).

Cornell frames a good part of her historical analysis around a distinction that has become commonplace in Islamic studies between "Proto-Sufism" and "Sufism." As she writes, "one cannot speak meaningfully about Sufism as a tradition until at least the second half of the ninth century" (p. 220). However, the evidence she presents throughout her study illustrates how extensively certain ideas and forms of religiosity that are believed to characterize the formative period of Sufism proper were already present much earlier. This is because the transition from instrumental to essential asceticism, and from essential asceticism to love mysticism is, for Cornell, not just a simple, linear historical process, but may also occur within the life of a single individual in the maturation and development of their religious consciousness. This observation undercuts the argument of at least some contemporary scholars of Sufism who wish to neatly distinguish between an ascetic phase that was followed by a mystical one in early Islam. For Cornell, because essential asceticism naturally blends into a mysticism of love, it should not surprise us to find mystical elements present in Muslim piety before the middle of the ninth century. The full implications of the view, however, are not extensively drawn out, and center ultimately around the nature of human selfhood. If there is something unchanging and universal about human selfhood, it follows that there are certain states, experiences, and forms of knowledge, particularly those which are "mystical" in nature, that transcend history and remain accessible to everyone, everywhere, by virtue of their participation in human nature. If, on the other hand, human nature is entirely a product of historical, cultural, economic, and social factors (as proposed in the social sciences and the humanities in the modern Western academy) it follows that certain experiences, modes of being, and types of knowledge, will only be possible when the circumstances that create them are present. This is the crux of the matter in the debate around the origins of Sufism. It centers around what we consider to be accessible to the human being outside of the conditions of history. To explore this question, however, would have taken Cornell outside of the parameters of her work (broad as they are) into the domain of metaphysics and philosophy. It would also have led her into the burgeoning terrain of the post/de-colonial study of Sufism, through an exploration of the subject outside of the boundaries of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment study of

religion, both of which reject epistemological access to Transcendence because they reject its ontological reality altogether.³

It is difficult to do justice to such a robust work of scholarship within the few pages of a book review. Exhaustive in both its scope and depth, Cornell surveys a vast array of literature to produce a virtually encyclopedic tour de force of early Muslim spirituality. Despite its length, it never becomes repetitive. Each of its chapters offer fresh insights into the six tropes of Rabi'a that are the central subject matter of the book. Naturally, in a work of such a size, and one which explores so many dimensions of Muslim piety, biography, hagiography, myth-making, and the transmission of knowledge, one is bound to have their points of contention. To draw attention to them, however, would unnecessarily detract from the overall merit of a book that no serious student of the academic study of Sufism can afford to ignore.

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Endnotes

1. This motif, which animated many of her legends, would so impress the 17th century French bishop, Jean-Pierre Camus, that he would say of her, "I found in her a master more faithful in the science of saints and in the doctrine of salvation than any other source ever presented to me after the Holy Scripture." Commenting on her words, "first the Neighbor, then the house (*al-jar thumma al-dar*)," the French bishop contrasted Rabi'a's doctrine of "pure love" with the mercenary expectations of those who "preferred God's paradise to the God of Paradise." Cited in Michel Chodkiewicz, "Female Sainthood in Islam," *Sufi: A Journal of Sufism* no. 21 (1994): 12-19, at 12.

2. Atif Khalil, *Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism* (Albany: State University of New York, 2018), 235n59.

3. Even if one encounters an agnosticism towards Transcendence, the effect is virtually the same, since it is rendered irrelevant to "scientifically" grasping the phenomenon of religion which, it is believed, can be adequately explained by the tools of the modern Western academic. See Huston Smith's treatment of the colonization of the study of religion by modernist and postmodernist modes of thinking in *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*

(New York: HaperOne: 2006). Also of relevance to the study of Islam on this question is Wael Hallaq's recent work, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), where he wishes to move beyond Edward Said's ultimately Eurocentric critique of Islamology, which replaces one kind of Orientalism for another. For more on this question in relation to Sufism, see Atif Khalil and Shiraz Sheikh, "Sufism in Western Historiography: A Brief Historiography," *Philosophy East and West* 66, no. 1 (2016): 194–217, especially at 205–207. For a parallel critique of the state of Quranic studies, see Joseph Lumbard, "Decolonizing Qur'anic Studies," *Religions* 13, no. 12 (2022).

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Sculpting the Self: Islam, Selfhood, and Human Flourishing

Muhammad U. Faruque

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328 Pages.

Muhammad U. Faruque frames his project as one of salvage. Against a backdrop of unresolved scientific and philosophical debates about the very existence of the self, he seeks to put forward a theory of self "in such a way that one would be able to resolve all the apparent contradictions concerning it" (p. 2). The robust and substantial existence of the self (involving, for Faruque, self-knowledge and self-awareness) is necessary not only to legitimate our everyday presumption of selfhood, but, far more urgently, it is "indispensable as we think of our moral and ethical flourishing" (p. 2). The book, a development of Faruque's dissertation on selfhood and subject formation in Islamic thought, puts the theories of Muslim philosophers, Sufis, and theologians into dialogue with those of non-Islamic thinkers, namely Western (i.e., European and North American) and Indian philosophies of self. Faruque's book is organized not by chronology, thinker, or region, but rather by the development of his own argument for what he calls a "spectrum theory" of selfhood with both normative and descriptive levels. Throughout the work, he engages, thoughtfully and thoroughly, with the challenges to the self's existence and "multimodal" nature posed by prominent philosophers of various traditions.

It is important for readers to understand what Faruque's book is, and what it is not. Those familiar with Islamic studies and drawn in by a title that apparently