

Friendship at the Heart of Taşawwuf: A Conversation with Sa'diyya Shaikh on Sufi Ethics, Epistemic Justice, and Ontological Equality*

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Abstract

This interview explores Sa'diyya Shaikh's approach to Sufism, ethics, and knowledge production. Shaikh situates friendship at the heart of taşawwuf, reframing the relationship between God and the human being in terms of reciprocity and intimacy, and the relationship between teacher and disciple as one of dynamic, accountable authority rather than fixed hierarchy. She critiques the secular and Eurocentric assumptions shaping women's studies, arguing that Islamic thought, through its pluriversal epistemologies, can contribute to the decolonization of the field. Her methodology of "retrieval and reimagination" describes a mode of engaging tradition that joins rigorous critique with an ethic of love—what she terms "radical critical fidelity." Through figures such as Hagar and Khawlah, the Mujādilah, she rereads the tradition's legacy of justice and resistance, while her notion of a "tafsir of praxis" affirms lived experience as a legitimate ground of interpretation. Ibn 'Arabī's account of ontological equality is connected to questions of social and ritual equality, and a jamālī ethics grounded in love, mercy, and reciprocity links personal spirituality to the pursuit of justice.

Keywords: Sufism, Sufi ethics, Decolonization, Epistemic justice, Ontological equality, Jamālī ethics.

* The following conversation between Sa'diyya Shaikh (University of Cape Town) and Betül Özel Çiçek (KADEM) follows the keynote, "Flourishing Feminist Friendships: Engaging Contemporary Sufi Ethics" delivered at the Women and Sufism workshop organized by KADEM. The exchange has been lightly edited for readability.

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Tasavvufun Kalbinde Dostluk: Sa'diyya Shaikh ile Sufi Etik, Epistemik Adalet ve Ontolojik Eşitlik Üzerine Bir Söyleşi*

Öz

Bu söyleşi, Sa'diyya Shaikh'in tasavvuf, etik ve bilgi üretimi üzerine geliştirdiği yaklaşımı ele almaktadır. Shaikh, dostluğu tasavvufun merkezine yerleştirerek Allah ile insan arasındaki ilişkiyi karşılıklılık ve yakınlık temelinde, mürid-mürid ilişkisini ise sabit bir hiyerarşi yerine dinamik ve hesap verebilir bir otorite biçiminde yeniden düşünür. Kadın çalışmalarını biçimlendiren seküler ve Batı merkezci varsayımları eleştirerek, İslamî düşüncenin çoğulcu bilgi anlayışıyla bu alanın dekolonizasyonuna katkı sunabileceğini ileri sürer. "Geri kazanım ve yeniden tahayyül" olarak adlandırdığı yöntem, geleneğe hem titiz bir eleştiriyle hem de sevgi temelli bir bağlılıkla yaklaşmayı, yani radikal eleştirel sadakati ifade eder. Hacer ve Mücâdile gibi figürler üzerinden gelenekteki adalet ve direniş mirasını yeniden okur; "praksis tefsiri" kavramıyla da yaşanmış deneyimi meşru bir yorum zemini olarak öne çıkarır. İbn 'Arabî'nin ontolojik eşitlik anlayışı, toplumsal ve ritüel eşitlik sorularıyla ilişkilendirilir; sevgi, merhamet ve karşılıklılık üzerine kurulu "cemâlî etik" ise bireysel maneviyat ile adalet arayışı arasında güçlü bir bağ kurar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tasavvuf, Sufi etik, Dekolonizasyon, Epistemik adalet, Ontolojik eşitlik, Cemâlî etik.

Atıf/Citation: Shaikh, S., & Özel-Çiçek, B. (2026). Friendship at the heart of tasawwuf: A conversation with Sa'diyya Shaikh on sufi ethics, epistemic justice, and ontological equality. *KADEM Journal of Women's Studies*, 12(1), 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.21798/kadem.2026.201>

* Sa'diyya Shaikh (University of Cape Town) ile Betül Özel Çiçek (KADEM) arasında geçen aşağıdaki söyleşi, KADEM tarafından düzenlenen "Kadınlar ve Tasavvuf" çalıştayında sunulan "Gelişen Feminist Dostluklar: Çağdaş Sufi Ahlâkıyla Diyalog" başlıklı açılış konuşmasını takip etmektedir. Metin, okunabilirliği artırmak amacıyla sınırlı ölçüde gözden geçirilmiştir.

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Friendship as the Heart of *Taşawwuf*

Betül Özel Çiçek: At last year's Women and Sufism workshop organized by KADEM, your keynote, "Flourishing Feminist Friendships: Engaging Contemporary Sufi Ethics," invited us to rethink solidarity through the ethical and affective dimensions of Sufi thought. Drawing on Sufi notions of love, companionship, and moral cultivation, you proposed a spiritual framework for imagining new relationships beyond critique or resistance alone. Could we begin by asking how this idea of friendship emerged in your engagement with Sufism?

Sa'diyya Shaikh: The idea of friendship is at the essence, the ethics, of *taşawwuf*. For me, friendship is about intimacy. The *awliyā'*, (those who in our tradition are considered closest to Allāh, in the most intimate of relationships) are actually described by this term, and *awliyā'* means friends. So at the very heart of the most intimate relationship, between the human being and Allāh, is this interactional, mutual relationship. In that sense, friendship captures the heart of *taşawwuf*, because while Allāh subḥānahu wa ta'ālā is transcendent and deserves our absolute reverence and awe, Allāh is also immanent, closer to us than our jugular vein. We have a relationship of intense mutuality and intimacy, more intimate than we would ever know with any other being. Friendship captures that domain: an interrelationship of mutuality, not a flat hierarchy, not only transcendence, but the immanence of Allāh.

Friendship is also a beautiful modality because of what it does within Sufi tradition itself. *Taşawwuf* is not one thing, it is a whole genealogy with many dynamics. Our human communities have cultivated very hierarchical notions within it. In my work on friendship, I actually argue that hierarchy in itself is not per se a bad thing. Hierarchies are indeed necessary for human existence. We have teachers and students because teachers know something that students need to learn. The dynamic of hierarchy in itself is not the problem; the problem is when hierarchies are not accountable. They need to be dynamic hierarchies with mutual accountability.

Friendship gives us a way of thinking about such relationships between human beings - particularly between Sufi teachers and students - where we recognize, through *dhawq*, through the very taste of being in the presence of extraordinary teachers, that there is a transmissiveness, a certain *barakah*, a way in which we receive things in the presence of a *walī* or anyone in that station of intimacy with Allāh. We recognize a kind of spiritual hierarchy. But simultaneously we need to ensure that the way we structure these relationships allows us to recognize someone's expertise, their elevated *maqām*, their transmissiveness while also holding people accountable to ethical standards.

Historically, and one of the reasons I have developed this in more detail recently, there have been a number of stories of abuse: Sufi shaykhs who have been abusive, particularly toward women and younger people. So thinking through friendship is a response to the question of how to keep teachers accountable. Accountability is easier if you think about the relationship as a friendship rather than as one in which "the shaykh is above you and the student must simply receive and obey," where *fanā' fi'l-shaykh* (the abdication of selfhood in a spiritual teacher) can become a dangerous modality. Friendship, for me, provides a corrective: a way to honor an elevated teacher's state while also insisting on transparency, accountability, and the recognition that teachers learn from their students. As exalted as a teacher may be, as spiritually attuned, every teaching relationship is a learning for both parties. So we think of these hierarchies as fluid: at some point you are a teacher; at another point a student, and within the relationship there is mutuality. There must be ethical accountability so that we can preempt some of these abuses.

Part of the problem with esoteric authority, not just in the Islamic tradition, but across the board, is that whenever there is a sense of someone being close to the Divine, their authority, if it goes off-center even slightly, it can become the site of enormous abuse, because people have invested so much belief and trust in a human being as a conduit of spiritual teaching. When that person falters - and we are all human, we can all falter - accountability is not easy. If we think of the relationship as friendship, friends hold each other accountable. So friendship is a way of thinking about more dynamic modes of engagement between teachers and students.

Betül Özel Çiçek: If I understand you correctly, the term “hierarchy” itself is somewhat problematic because it is fixed. Yet closeness to Allāh and our positions can change in a moment, a shaykh can fall and a *murīd* can be elevated. Perhaps the term hierarchy, with all its connotations, is too rigid. Could we think instead in terms of *marātib* (stations or degrees) rather than hierarchy?

Sa’diyya Shaikh: Absolutely. One way I have spoken about this, borrowing from social theory, is to talk about “competent authority” rather than simply a hierarchy. Competent authority carries certain implications. The spiritual life is so fluid: as a shaykh, you can build up and accrue great spiritual power, and in any moment, if the *nafs* falters, all of that power is still there but is now directed destructively. In that moment, the student can be impacted quite intensely. It is critical to always remember a basic teaching of *taşawwuf*: none of this power belongs to any of us; it is all Allāh’s *qudrah*. So you are right, we need different language. It is about recognizing the dynamic movement of teaching and learning.

On Decolonizing Women’s Studies and Reclaiming Religious Knowledge

Betül Özel Çiçek: Women’s studies as a discipline have often been shaped by Eurocentric epistemologies and secular feminist frameworks. How do you see Islamic thought contributing to the decolonization of the field, and what does it mean to reclaim theological and spiritual knowledge as legitimate sources?

Sa’diyya Shaikh: It is a critical question, because so much of secular feminism is born from Enlightenment thinking. There is a long Western history of feminist resistance to religion but it is really a resistance to a Christian ontology that has dominated those spaces. “Religion” then gets cast in a monolithic manner, which is deeply problematic, because you are dealing with a specific Western history and the baggage that comes out of it, and then projecting that onto all religious traditions.

As a decolonial move, we embrace pluriversal realities. Secular feminism initially emerged from a Western idea of the universal, though I have to add nuance, because right now Western feminism is itself heterogeneous;

there are Western feminists deeply attuned to difference and sensitivity of women's diversity. So I say this under erasure, while also recognizing that you still have entrenched secularist feminists who are dogmatic against religion, alongside a whole spectrum of other positions, including religious feminists within Women's Studies. This tension between religious feminists and secular feminists already existed within Western, Eurocentric spaces, with religious feminists making the case that within Christianity or Judaism there are resources for thinking about justice and women's humanity while secular feminists countered that all of that was false consciousness.

In a period of Islamophobia, this gets weaponized to say: "you are in double false consciousness" because you are both the subject of a religion supposedly distinguished by its hatred of women and androcentrism, and because religion as a whole is a problem. The deep flaw in such logic is that it imposes one specific Western genealogy as everybody's experience. That is a colonial move. To tell women what their realities are, is not only a colonial move, it is also patriarchal. It is exactly what patriarchal men have always said: "you don't know your own reality; we are telling you what your reality is." So it is a bizarrely self-contradictory move. Especially in this current moment of Islamophobia, there is a resurfacing of the trope that Islam is peculiarly anti-women, peculiarly violent - the bread and butter of Islamophobia. To insist on the agency of religious women is to reject such tropes.

I am sensitive to the fact that Muslim women are not a monolith; we know this from our own experience. There is not one Muslim woman, not one Muslim woman's reality. But there is clearly a body of Muslim women for whom the tradition is deeply meaningful, and who embrace it with all of its complexity. No one claims that the tradition is only an archive of all things egalitarian, free, and gender-just. The tradition is a mixed bag, because human beings are a mixed bag, because our histories are mixed bags. We have a tense and at times, contested tradition, with different parts jostling against one another. Some Islamic feminists and other religious feminists claim that justice and egalitarianism are the heart and the spirit of their traditions, and that the injustices that have accrued around it (gender, racial, or otherwise), are not its ontological core. Because Allāh subḥānahu wa ta'ālā is just, and every human life carries the absolute

sacrality of the *naḥkh al-rūh*, there cannot be injustice at the ontological level. This is a fundamental ontological justice that Islamic feminists focus on, and demand that this ontological justice must translate into the social sphere and animate how we live.

So when rigidly secular feminists say “religion is misogynist,” what they are actually doing is taking a particular patriarchal narrative of religion and authorizing it. They are giving men’s understandings of religion the status of religion itself. They are mirroring a patriarchal move.

It is also an anti-feminist move, because feminist theory is grounded in women’s experience. If you take women’s experience seriously as an epistemological base for understanding knowledge and reality, then refusing to take women’s religious experiences seriously violates a fundamental feminist epistemological premise. We need to problematize the idea that religion in general, and Islam in particular, is peculiarly the domain of sexism. All human societies have had different iterations of patriarchy. Even Enlightenment sciences were deeply misogynist; their theories of gender were steeped in patriarchy. Religious and intellectual traditions have long histories in many different spaces, and we need to engage them critically while holding onto what is valuable in them.

I can speak experientially only for Islam - what is most life-giving within it is also what is most deeply humanizing and what allows us to fulfill our existential potential. So it is not just one value among others; it is the ultimate value. I am not making this claim for everybody, only for Muslim women for whom this tradition is meaningful. The very purpose of our existence gets fulfilled by engaging with this tradition in relation to those fundamental ontological questions.

On a Methodology of Retrieval and Reimagination

Betül Özel Çiçek: You have previously described your approach as a methodology of retrieval and reimagination, a form of critical, radical fidelity to the tradition. Could you expand on how this approach operates?

Sa'diyya Shaikh: Thinking about this term, radical critical fidelity, is a way of inhabiting Islamic tradition both as a home and as a horizon. It describes an orientation that neither abandons the tradition nor accepts it uncritically. For me, it is a radical love of the tradition and a radical critique of it, the capacity to hold both simultaneously.

Betül Özel Çiçek: Born out of love.

Sa'diyya Shaikh: Exactly. To be deeply committed and deeply loyal... I use the word fidelity because it is a question of *īmān* (a faithfulness and loyalty to tradition) and it is defined by a radical love of the most deeply animating, spiritually enriching, and humanizing elements of the tradition (the mappings for how to be a righteous and ethical human being in the world), together with a rigorous and radical critique against injustice within it.

The phrase “radical critical fidelity” was originally used as a throwaway line by a woman who was one of my early teachers in methodology, a Christian feminist. She used it in her book without defining it, but it stayed with me. I wondered what it might mean, and I have since worked through how to inhabit and build this concept in my own way.

The critique recognizes that we have inherited patriarchal histories and interpretive authorities that have been harmful to us. In feminist hermeneutics this is sometimes called a “hermeneutic of suspicion.” When we look critically for patriarchy, we have to name it, because we have internalized so much androcentrism and patriarchy unconsciously that, unnamed, it continues to victimize us. It often becomes an invisible structure within our home. Once you name it, you see it; once you see it, you cannot unsee it. Then it no longer has the same power over you.

Betül Özel Çiçek: You cannot unsee it.

Sa'diyya Shaikh: Exactly. As an aside, I teach a graduate course on Religion, Gender, and Sexuality, and by the end of each course about eighty per cent of my students are angry with me. They are angry because they can no longer unsee the injustice. That means they have to think and live differently. I say *al-ḥamdulillāh*, this is a sacred anger. Only when we

break down internal idols, when we have made patriarchy or masculinity or particular power structures into the very landscape of our religious tradition, can we clear the space between ourselves and Allāh, and between ourselves and dignified relationships with other human beings.

That is the critique. The radical love is to retrieve and to reimagine. I use a garden metaphor. The first move is weeding: weeds suck nutrients out of the soil, so if we think of patriarchy as a weed sucking the spiritual life-force, we have to pull it out. Then we have to nurture the flowers already in the garden that we did not see, and plant new seeds, and feed them so they can flower new realities. The flowers of the tradition are there, so often rendered invisible or deprived of nutrients and we have to retrieve them. Retrieval, for me, is about rendering visible the fullness of the Muslim archive. We have had a tradition of strong, forceful, extraordinary Muslim women who have contested every kind of injustice from the first day as part of their faith. We retrieve that power, that justice-seeking, that God-seeking, because God-seeking and justice-seeking are, for me, deeply intertwined.

Betül Özel Çiçek: Do you think there is a methodology for this retrieval, a filtering system for example, or no system at all?

Sa'diyya Shaikh: Many women writing in Islamic feminism have written precisely about these moments of retrieval, about how one re-reads history. Fatima Mernissi's work is an example. In her book, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, she takes *ḥadīth* traditions that make claims about women's authority and asks: in which context was this transmitted, who was the narrator? She uses very classical *isnād* criticism to debunk such claims, then asks what other voices were present. She is both retrieving and re-reading the tradition critically, deploying feminist critique, and asking what else is happening, who is speaking, where they are speaking from, and how they are resisting.

Another example, I do not know whether you have seen it is a beautiful poetry collection, *Hajar Poems*, by Mohja Kahf.

Betül Özel Çiçek: No, I haven't, unfortunately.

Sa'diyya Shaikh: I went on *ʿumrah* and sat in the *maṭāf* reading Mohja Kahf's book of poems (2016) to Sayyidatunā Hājar: "We are here, your daughters. We remember you and we love you." That book of poetry was a retrieval of Sayyidatunā Hājar in a creative register that was, for me, more powerful *tafsīr* than anything I had read in any *tafsīr* book. We have these incredibly powerful women: this single woman, enslaved, brought from Egypt, an enslaved concubine, left in the desert. We are a Hagarian tradition. We are from Sayyidatunā Hājar *ʿalayhā al-salām*. We call ourselves the Abrahamic tradition, but we would not exist if it were not for this woman.

Betül Özel Çiçek: And she had such a connection with God that He made all the Muslims who came after her repeat her footsteps. Our *ʿibādah* is to try to recreate her ritual. There must be something fundamental there.

Sa'diyya Shaikh: Absolutely, but the problem is that people often do this ritually without an understanding. Recently when I went on *ʿumrah*, I ran, as Hājar ran. There is a convention among some traditional *ulama* that women should not run. But who are we imitating? We are imitating a woman. And yet they say that "the Muslim women here mustn't run, they mustn't hasten like Hājar." It is the most bizarre, illogical thing because the ritual is reproduced without truly recognizing who did it and for what end. If it had not been for her, Ismāʿīl *ʿalayhī al-salām* would not have survived; the Muslim *ummah* would not have come into being. This is powerful.

Betül Özel Çiçek: The way Sayyidatunā Hājar's story is often told, it is as if all she is doing is waiting for Ibrāhīm *ʿalayhī al-salām*. She is not waiting for Ibrāhīm *ʿalayhī al-salām*. She establishes a city there. She establishes the rites of *ʿibādah* there. She raises Ismāʿīl *ʿalayhī al-salām*, all by herself. She does not wait for Ibrāhīm *ʿalayhī al-salām* to return at intervals. To narrate her life as if she does not exist without him is not Islamic at all; it denies her rights as one of our spiritual leaders.

Sa'diyya Shaikh: Absolutely. We see her in a narrowly ritualistic frame: simply you must run from Ṣafā to Marwah as part of *ḥajj* and *ʿumrah*. But what is being symbolized by this powerful ritual? The origin of the *ummah*, and the truth that you have to work and run and plead with Allāh

and surrender, but a surrender that is active. The model of this *İslām*, this engaged surrender, is Hājar. Without her, we would not exist. So to retrieve Hājar is to ask: what is she modelling? She is a single mother. She is racially other. She is a migrant arriving in this context. What does that mean for single women, for single mothers? Sayyidatunā Hājar occupies all of those margins, and we are asked to imitate her. This demands deeper reflection on our part as a community.

We can think about her not only historically but as a question we have to keep asking: who are the Hājars of our time, and how have we rendered them peripheral and unimportant because we have decided that the religious person is somebody else? Who are the working-class women among us? Who are the disabled members of our community whose realities we do not see, because we are able-bodied? How do we not insist that our prayer spaces and workspaces be disability-friendly? Spirituality is not only going to the *masjid*; it is about what it means to let a human being exist in the fullness of who they are, including those who are at the margins of the society. How do we bring the margins to the center? We have all of these models, yet we read them in very narrow ways. That is why you must read the Hājar poems: it is a beautiful way of remembering Sayyidatunā Hājar.

To come back to retrieval: the other thing Mohja Kahf does beautifully and we have used this in the women's *khuṭbah* book—is to think about the *Mujādilah*. The *Mujādilah* is a Qur'ānic modality. *Subḥān Allāh*, I did not really recognize the *Mujādilah* until well into my adulthood. In the story, the woman, Khawlah bint Tha'labah approaches the Prophet about *zihār* and says, in effect: "this practice is unjust; from my experience, it is not working for me." The Prophet first responds that this is the custom; what is he to do? She says no. With all the love in her heart, she says no to the Prophet and asks him: "Please take it back to God."

First, we have to recognize the way the first *ṣaḥābah* were friends with the Rasūl *ṣallā Allāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam*. They could say to our most beloved Rasūl: "Yā Rasūl Allāh, thank you for your response, but please take it back to God." She is essentially saying: "You do not get it. You do not get my suffering. Allāh will get my suffering, but you do not, because you do not know what it is to be a woman in this situation." Yā ḥabībī, you are this

beautiful *Nabī* who has received *wahy*, but you are also a man, and you do not know this experience. So she says: take it back to Allāh. The Prophet does not say, “You must listen to me and respect my authority.” He does not say that.

So we are immediately learning a certain mode of authority and what friendship with the Rasūl looks like. If a woman could question the Prophet, who are any of our leaders today? Even the most elevated shaykhs and teachers can be questioned when the experience of injustice is real. Then the Prophet sits, and there is this beautiful narration that Mohja Kahf works with. She speaks about how, when the Prophet was praying about this, all the women prayed together with Khawlah, they prayed for Allāh to respond to her. There was a community of women who understood that this was painful, and so they prayed for a response. Allāh’s response was: I hear her, I hear the Mujādilah.

What does that teach us? To resist injustice, even before the highest authority. By responding to her and by naming an entire *sūrah* after her, Allāh subḥānahu wa ta‘ālā is telling us we should be questioning injustice; here is my response. It is a way of asking what it means to be a Muslim, what it means to be in relationship with God’s word, what it means to recognize that one’s experiences are a legitimate space from which to engage the Qur’ān and the tradition; that there is an authority to your experience of injustice, an authority sufficient to wrestle with the tradition. The Qur’ān tells us that if all the trees were pens and all the oceans were ink, seven times refilled, they would not exhaust the words of Allāh. The Qur’ān is itself an ocean: an ocean of possibilities, of meaning, speaking differently to different people in different times and contexts. Our relationship with the text is a living relationship. The Mujādilah shows us this. We must retrieve and reimagine the tradition in relation to our own experience. We must bring our experience to the Qur’ān.

As a young person I was troubled by the *nushūz* verse. In my master’s degree I studied the *tafsir* texts of al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzi and al-Ṭabarī on this verse. They brought their very local lenses to this reading, because that is how we all read, from within our own understanding of the world. The way we read now will be very different. In two hundred years they will look back and say, “Look at those twenty-first-century women, bringing

their own biases.” But that is what we do, and that is also the beauty of it. We read with our limitations, and we read for our needs; we read to be elevated, to be inspired, and to long for our own elevation. That sincerity is what is of value.

So the methodology of retrieval and reimagination is this. We have these resources. I have a hundred other stories, you do, too. Umm Salamah is, for me, one of those women. Reimagining is to pull those women forward into the present. In our women’s *khuṭbah* work, we use three figures, the Mujādilah, Sayyidatunā Maryam, and Sayyidatunā Hājar as models, and we ask: who are the Hājars of our time? When Sayyidatunā Maryam, in the *miḥrāb*, is given summer fruit in winter and winter fruit in summer, what is the symbolism? What are the fruits in our time, unusual and uncomfortable, that we must deal with? How do we embrace and respond to them in a spiritually open way?

Betül Özel Çiçek: After the *Ifk*, when Sayyidatunā ‘Ā’ishah’s mother advises her to thank the Prophet, she refuses, saying she will thank Allāh. It is one of the profound moments of my life when I read this incident, because it proves that our connection is directly linked to God, not through anyone else.

Sa’diyya Shaikh: Absolutely, and that is one of the modalities we draw on as well. She is essentially saying: “Allāh is the first and the last.”

Betül Özel Çiçek: And she is deconstructing all the institutions of patriarchy in that very moment, pledging her alliance directly to God, she is saying that there is nothing above God, no authority, not the husband’s, not the parents’. She deconstructs them all, in one sentence, with such elegance. It is astonishing.

Sa’diyya Shaikh: There is so much of this in our tradition, Betül. Why have we not learned this as young women? Why has this not been a central part of our education? That is the question we must ask.

Betül Özel Çiçek: Do you have an answer?

Sa’diyya Shaikh: Patriarchy.

On Interdisciplinarity

Betül Özel Çiçek: Your scholarship consistently bridges religious ethics, theology, and social inquiry. In what ways can interdisciplinary methods help expand the methodological boundaries, particularly in contexts where religion and spirituality remain central to women's lived experiences?

Sa'diyya Shaikh: Interdisciplinarity is not only a methodological choice; human beings do not exist in compartments. Interdisciplinarity helps us engage the human being in our full complexity. Feminist insights on embodiment, Sufi metaphysics of the heart, empirical engagements with Muslim women's lived realities, looking at all of these together, across sociology, theology, philosophy, and so on, gives us different lenses through which to see the full picture of human lives. So it is not just a methodological choice; it is about how we study human beings holistically.

It also helps us move beyond simplistic understandings and opens up epistemological space for thinking about ethics through experience, metaphysics, theology, and the realities of the everyday, as well as the deeper ontologies and worldviews we inhabit: the assumptions about the nature of truth and reality in which we are ensconced.

Ibn 'Arabī and the Question of Ontological Equality

Betül Özel Çiçek: In your book *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy* (Shaikh 2014), you engage Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysics. In what ways do you see the Sufi concepts of love, embodiment, and divine intimacy reconfiguring debates on subjectivity, agency, and relational ethics?

Sa'diyya Shaikh: Ibn 'Arabī was a wonderful discovery for me. Prior to working on him, my early graduate research was on Muslim women in South Africa who were survivors of intimate-partner violence. I was studying how the religious community responded and how the women themselves navigated their situations. As I listened to the various arguments religious leaders offered for marital hierarchy, what struck me was that the underlying question was missing: what is the nature of being human, and how does gender work? What are the underlying assumptions about human nature? Because ethics flows from an understanding of human nature.

Ibn ‘Arabī was, for me, an extraordinary discovery, because at the essence of his thought there is a deeply egalitarian anthropology: all of us are constellations and combinations of the *asmā’ al-ḥusnā*, irrespective of gender. This is in fact at the heart of Qur’ānic ontology, but he expands it in a beautiful way that became meaningful for me.

Ontological equality has been articulated in many narratives, not only by the Sufis. But you often hear an apologetic and sometimes romantic patriarchal narrative that men and women are equal ontologically and spiritually but, practically, are “complementary,” where complementarity often means whatever patriarchs decide it means. I was very curious to ask: if we are adherents of *tawḥīd*, if Allāh subḥānahu wa ta‘ālā is not simply a reality within ourselves but something we must live ethically, and the Qur’ān is constantly tying piety to ‘*amal* and action in the world, what kind of equality is ontological but has no meaningful social repercussions?

Ibn ‘Arabī was interesting in this regard. I have an excerpt from his work that I often quote, especially because there is a refrain that the impulse for women to lead prayer is a contemporary Western feminist influence. Already in the twelfth and thirteenth century, Ibn ‘Arabī writes (and I will quote from the passage I cite in *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*): “Some people allow the *imāmah* of women absolutely, before a congregation of men and women. I agree with this. Some forbid her *imāmah* absolutely. Others permit her *imāmah* in a congregation exclusively of women. Now how do we evaluate it? The Prophet has testified about the spiritual *kamāl* of some women, just as he witnessed it of some men, even though there may be more men than women in such perfection. This perfection is prophethood. And being a prophet involves taking on the role of a leader. Thus women’s *imāmah* is sound. The basic principle is allowing women’s *imāmah*.” He adds: “Thus whoever asserts that it is forbidden without proof, he should be ignored. The one who forbids this has no explicit *naṣṣ*, no text. His only proof in forbidding is this shared negative opinion of her” -a stereotype, in our terms- “and this proof is insubstantial. The basic principle remains, which is allowing women’s *imāmah*.”

So there is a direct relationship between the spiritual ontological capacity for *kamāl*, I do not like “perfect”; I think “complete” is a better word, the spiritually complete human being and social and ritual leadership. The

ontological equality and the social equality are tied together. In another discussion on *‘awrah*, Ibn ‘Arabī asks whether the *‘awrah* differs for women and men. If you look at Adam and Ḥawwā’, he says, it is really just the genitals for both. He adds that if people choose to cover more for the sake of modesty, “that is the view of our school” that is fine; it is for a social reason. But ontologically, it is the same for men and women. He is very interesting in this respect.

We have these precedents for thinking about relationality and for understanding gender justice as part of how we think about spiritual equality. Gender justice is not a twenty-first-century imposition. In Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Dīwān* there are, fourteen poems, and thirteen of them are dedicated to his women *murīdāt*. He speaks about his women teachers as well. He almost shows off, as one of my teachers once put it, about how Ibn ‘Arabī comes with all of himself, fully present. He speaks lovingly about one of his teachers in whose company he would blush. She was ninety years old, but he would blush in her company because she was so luminous. *Māshā’ Allāh*. We have here the full spiritual engagement in community: as leaders, as teachers, as students, fully recognized. He tells us elsewhere that he travelled with a woman who used to levitate. He is travelling through the desert with this woman who levitates. We have this in our tradition. How convenient that none of it gets remembered. Who decided to make this invisible? How dare they? Our tradition has had very powerful spiritual male teachers who were profoundly influenced by even more spiritually powerful women teachers, and vice versa. This complete history of social engagement with spiritual capacity is part of our tradition, and it must be part of how we imagine our way of being in the world.

A Tafsīr of Praxis

Betül Özel Çiçek: Your idea of a *tafsīr* of praxis reimagines Qur’ānic interpretation through lived experience. How did your own spiritual and intellectual journey shape your approach to Sufi texts, and what challenges have you faced in bringing experiential knowledge into academic discourse?

Sa'diyya Shaikh: As I mentioned earlier, the *tafsîr* of praxis emerged from my interviews with women who were in the trenches of patriarchy, physically abused, marginalized in many ways. What I found powerful was that, for most of these women, what supported them, gave them hope, and offered a way forward was their relationship with Allāh. They had very specific way of creating Quranic lifeworlds and readings, what I came to argue were a *tafsîr* born of their location.

One woman said to her husband: “You cannot lead the *ṣalāh*. You cannot beat me up and then claim to be *imām* in our house. You have not asked me for forgiveness, and Allāh has given me the right.” That is *tafsîr*. That is *tafsîr* on the ground. She is bringing Qur’ānic teachings into a living relationship with an ethics of justice, not as an abstract verse-by-verse exercise but as a practical theological discernment. These women had grappled, educated themselves, drawn on the heart of Allāh’s justice, and in very powerful ways imagined how to resist the violence they were facing.

I wanted to name this as *tafsîr*, not simply as “engagement with Islam,” because all interpretation comes out of people’s lived experiences. But patriarchal, androcentric knowledge renders invisible the male experience that does the interpreting. If you are speaking from a different reality, your interpretations are inflected by that reality. When we render this visible, we also expose the fact that what is presented as universal knowledge is actually only one half of the human condition and not even all of that half, but an elite among men. They are not even speaking for all men. The moment we render that visible, we restore the authority of ordinary people to engage the Qur’ān in ways meaningful to their lives.

That kind of intimate access to the Qur’ān is a space for meaning-making. That is why I call it a *tafsîr* of praxis: it gives voice to people who do not occupy power and are not part of the powerful elite which includes some women scholars too, since not all are feminist or gender-egalitarian. Some of the most ardent defenders of patriarchy are women who feel that they will lose out if it is dismantled. *Subhān Allāh*, that is the nature of the world. We have to think about what it means to allow access to the Qur’ān not only for scholars, because the Qur’ān is not meant only for elite. How do we imbibe this beautiful text, which is not simply a book or static text

but a living text? What does a living text in relationship with our lives look like and feel like? What is the perfume the Qur’ān brings to our lives, and what is the perfume of our lives that intermingles with the perfume of the Qur’ān?

Sufi Virtues, Agency, and a Jamālī Ethics

Betül Özel Çiçek: You often draw on Sufi virtues like humility, love, reciprocity as ethical orientations. In what ways do you see these relational virtues offering alternative frameworks for thinking about agency beyond resistance and autonomy, as forms of moral and spiritual empowerment?

Sa’diyya Shaikh: These Sufi virtues, humility, love, reciprocity, gentleness, mercy, and justice, disrupt patriarchal ideas of agency that are grounded in domination, autonomy, and superiority. These virtues are not passive. Love, humility, justice, reciprocity require rigorous inner work and ethical discernment. Ibn ‘Arabī is very helpful here, actually, Ibn ‘Arabī makes the case, and the Islamic tradition makes the case strongly for prioritizing *jamāl* as the overriding way of occupying religious agency. When we begin with and return to *jamālī* attributes we can calibrate the *jalālī* dimensions in more refined ways. *Jalāl* and *jamāl* are both important and vital in the world. The point is that we constantly take refuge in the Most Merciful, in the *raḥmah* of Allāh, in the *jamāl*, so that we embody the *raḥmah*. When we are receptive to these qualities of Allāh *subḥānahu wa ta’ālā*, and only once we do that purification work, can the *jalāl* come into the right balance in our lives. This is what I am calling a **jamālī ethics** in the work I am developing.

One quote I love, and which I noted down for this conversation: Ibn ‘Arabī helps us imagine what forms of sociality this ethics might require by invoking a *ḥadīth qudsī*, and there is a biblical parallel to this as well. The *ḥadīth qudsī* runs: Allāh says, “I was hungry and you did not feed me; I was thirsty and you did not give me water; I was sick and you did not attend to me.” When the servants ask about this, He says: “As for the one who was sick, if you had tended to him, you would have found me with him; if you had fed the starving, you would have found me with him; if you had given water to the thirsty, you would have found me there.” Ibn ‘Arabī says this report is true; this is the fruit of love, when Allāh comes down to us.

This is an incredibly powerful *ḥadīth qudsī*. Divine love is revealed through Allāh's intimate presence with the most vulnerable and the marginalized. Allāh is amidst the thick of human suffering, and the *ḥadīth* asks us as believers to respond not only to physical conditions of illness, hunger, and deprivation, but to social and political conditions. It is not just physical illness; it is the illness of political inequality, the hunger, and deprivation. Right now, for us, it is Gaza and Sudan, where we see physical hunger, illness, and deprivation as the product of political illness. The tradition calls believers to reflect on this and to deliberately resist the systems that create hunger, thirst, and illness through violent structures of injustice, oppression, and genocide from Gaza to Sudan to Myanmar to every place where dictators and the Pharaohs of our time are running rogue.

Within these multiple worlds of deficit, illness, and destruction, this sacred tradition which has a biblical equivalent and so resonates deeply with the Bible, offers all people of faith the invitation to participate in the work of loving repair and rejuvenation. If Allāh is found with the hungry, the ill, and the thirsty, then spirituality can never be separated from political work that seeks to alleviate the economic and social conditions of lack, hunger, disease, need, and deprivation. Solidarity with the oppressed and the political work of transformation, creating worlds animated by compassion, care, and justice are part of the spiritual path.

Solidarity is not one thing for all men, *subḥān Allāh*, but for some Muslim men solidarity with Gaza comes easily while solidarity with the woman being beaten up in their own community does not. So what does a genuine solidarity with the oppressed look like in our worlds, local and global? We all have to think about this.

Political transformation must be about thinking through an inclusive solidarity. Engaging in the transformation of an unjust society offers each of us the opportunity to encounter Allāh *subḥānahu wa ta'ālā* firsthand, when we are in the thick of suffering, when we show up for the hungry, the poor, the ill. And when I speak of the hungry, the poor, and the ill, I mean it physically and figuratively: who is hungry? Whose parents have thrown them out of the house and they are hungry for nurture? When we show up for them, we show up for Allāh. Allāh is not only found in those places, but attending to the needs of people in those contexts, as

I have argued, is directly attending to Allāh, finding Allāh, being in the presence of Allāh face to face. Ibn ‘Arabī calls it the fruit of divine love. This is central, I would argue, to how we might imagine a *jamālī* ethics for our time, *in shā’ Allāh*.

Betül Özel Çiçek: These Sufi virtues you describe are often read as signs of weakness rather than as the marks of great leadership, within our communities too. When one is soft, loving, easily understanding, forgiving, one is not seen as a primary agent of social change. But this is precisely the leadership the Prophet *ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam* modeled. He was the most humble, the softest in gentleness, which does not mean he was not courageous. He was the bravest of people, because he had the power to be that gentle. The illness in our communities is to see gentleness as weakness; in a sense, this hurts both God and the Prophet.

Sa’diyya Shaikh: It is because we have a very limited understanding of masculinity. We have, in a sense, turned our backs on prophetic masculinity. We have not embraced the way the Prophet’s *jalāl* was so deeply immersed in his own *jamāl*, when he was strong and courageous, that strength came from a profoundly beautiful *jamālī* space. In a forthcoming article that I will share when it appears, I have proposed that this Prophetic masculinity of our beloved Rasul can be described as an “Ummati Masculinity” embodying a *jamālī* ethics, and it is currently reflected in men like the Khaled Nabhans of our time, the grandfather in Gaza, holding his granddaughter, the “soul of my soul,” living the Prophet’s model of masculinity: tender, caring, taking care of others including feeding the starving cats. *Subḥān Allāh*, we have living models of the Sunnah. We need to make those the models of masculinity—

Betül Özel Çiçek: —as the norm.

Sa’diyya Shaikh: Yes. Not these strange constructs of authority and authoritarianism that lack tenderness, lack *jamāl*. This is not our Sunnah.

Betül Özel Çiçek: And that kind of authority carries a hidden sickness within it. You can smell it; it rots.

Sa’diyya Shaikh: Absolutely.

Collaborative Futures: Global South's New Theologies

Betül Özel Çiçek: Looking toward the future of theology and women's studies, what kind of collaborative and dialogical futures do you envision between scholars in the Global South who work on them and Sufi thought? How might such engagements contribute to a more plural and spiritually grounded ethics?

Sa'diyya Shaikh: I would imagine collaborative futures grounded in friendship and dialogue, intellectual friendships, ethical friendships, spiritual friendships. Scholars from the Global South are deeply engaged with community and shaped by ongoing struggles around gender, race, coloniality, and spiritual belonging. Bringing Sufi thought into feminist theology allows us to draw on indigenous resources of relationality, justice, and ethical imagination. We can engage our tradition with radical love and radical critique, and think through, with other communities of women in the Global South who also live with legacies of colonialism, how to take ongoing struggles seriously and how to imagine beyond solidarity to a way of thinking about the human condition that allows us to flourish in a variety of spaces.

We need resistance, of course. But the question is how not to be caught only in the mode of resistance, because then we are always defined by the other. If we are only resisting, the face we are looking at is the face of our opponent. We need to resist, but we also need to say: that is not our fundamental interlocutor. Our fundamental conversation partner is the spiritual, Allāh. What does it mean to be in relationship with the Divine? What does that mean for our relationships with other human beings? How do we engage in spiritual transformation when we take every life and the *rūḥ* of every life seriously, because every life has been honored by the *naḥkh al-rūḥ*?

What does it mean to imagine worlds from very different starting points, worlds not shaped solely by colonial heritages? How do we bring different imaginaries, our own specific retrieved traditions, into a conversation about how to think about reality and justice? That kind of collaboration

helps us cultivate feminist futures that are plural, decolonial, spiritually and psychologically capacious that give us space to imagine different ways of being and allow for the fullness of our humanity to flourish, *in shā' Allāh*.

Betül Özel Çiçek: In shā' Allāh.

On the Word “Feminism”

Betül Özel Çiçek: Would you address what you understand by “feminism”? We had this argument at the workshop, whether being Muslim and being a feminist is contradictory.

Sa'diyya Shaikh: What is feminism, fundamentally? In some traditions, feminism is simply the view that women are fully human, the “radical idea” that women are human beings. Islamic feminism, in my view, is both a knowledge project and a world-making project, to borrow a phrase from scholarship in the field. It shares with all feminisms three things: a critical consciousness of sexism and gender injustice; a commitment to transforming that injustice through intellectual and political work; and a vision of justice, freedom, and equality. What is distinctive about Islamic feminism is that its vision of a just society is rooted in a foundational God-human relationship. The process and the goals of individual and communal life are situated within the relationship between human beings and God. Justice, freedom, and equality are situated within a larger understanding of *ḥaqq*, of truth and reality, within an Islamic cosmology.

So my feminism is a commitment to justice. Feminisms are multiple, but Islamic feminism is clear that it emerges from relationship with a just God who commands justice. Justice is a central imperative; Al-ʿAdl is one of the attributes of Allāh. Throughout the Qurʾān, the idea of justice is front and center. The problem, of course, is that people interpret justice in many ways. Islamic feminism asks what justice means here and now. So feminism is, for me, a consciousness that there is a problem; we see what we now cannot unsee; we want to change it; and our vision of freedom and equality is deeply immersed in a relationship with Allāh.

Betül Özel Çiçek: The question I often get from younger students—women in their first year of university—is a strong resistance to the term feminism. They will say: “I agree with everything that has been said, but do we have to be feminists to do all of this?”

Sa’diyya Shaikh: I do not think we need to call ourselves feminists. I come from a tradition in South Africa with a strong Black women’s feminist movement that has been very critical of colonial feminisms. My solidarity was formed in relationship to broader feminist struggles. But the term “feminism” itself: if we say feminism is X, and that X is what early white Western feminists were - second-wave white feminism- we then silence and make invisible the strong histories of Third World feminist women’s work that called itself feminist, resisted hegemonic white Western feminisms, defined feminism differently, and articulated what the Indian feminist Chandra Mohanty, already in 1984, called “horizontal comradeship”, respectful relationship with other women across difference. By saying “feminism is a problem,” we make feminism one thing, and we hand the term over to a small group of imperial feminists and in so doing, we erase a whole history of women in Africa, South America, the Middle East, and elsewhere who have inhabited their feminism with the fullness of their lives and built justice movements.

Feminism, for me, is a justice movement. But I increasingly think there are audiences where I simply do not use the language of feminism, because the word itself triggers a Western frame they cannot get past. In those settings I just use the words “gender justice.” Gender justice is an Islamic imperative. Whether you call yourself a feminist or not depends on your audience, your solidarities, and what is meaningful for the people you are speaking with. I speak regularly to Muslim communities in South Africa, and there I sometimes use “feminism” because it is part of a long history. Elsewhere I do not; I simply speak about gender injustice and patriarchy, how to resist them, and the Islamic imperative for justice.

It is a question of strategy, of what people can hear. There was a time when I was very insistent on keeping the word because of the histories of solidarity it carries. But, if it is not going to work for an audience, if the work is not going to happen, who cares what language we use? If the

work is the work, then whatever language people can receive is the right language. If they cannot hear “feminism,” we use “justice,” we use *rahmah*, these are deep in our tradition.

Betül Özel Çiçek: I have recently reached the same conclusion. Even when we talk about “human rights,” I see some men shutting themselves down, as if human rights are no concern of theirs, or as if talking about human rights is an attack on them. So I am trying now to use the language of solidarity and siblinghood to bring them into engagement with our concerns and have them defend our position.

Sa’diyya Shaikh: On that note, I am also struck by how many men now claim the term “decolonial.” Muslim men, brown men: “decolonial” is the big new thing many Muslim men embrace. They are very happy to be critical of injustice when white men have oppressed them, but their decoloniality has no intersectional lens. They are very happy to keep patriarchy in place. What is a genuine decoloniality? Decoloniality demands attention to all the interstices and intersecting points of injustice. You cannot continue to be a patriarch. You cannot just pick and choose—

Betül Özel Çiçek: —the injustices that suit you.

Sa’diyya Shaikh: Exactly. You cannot rail against one form of injustice and be complicit in another from which you are privileged; that is not a consistent embrace. I am very interested in how many men write about decoloniality while gender remains, as it were, just something on the side, “we will leave gender to those women scholars over there” as if gender were not a full structure of how injustice works in our societies, a structure in which men are fundamentally involved.

Betül Özel Çiçek: Yes, as if they are not the main actors. They simply cannot bother to be pushed out of their comfort zones.

Sa’diyya Shaikh: Absolutely. But again, we have to use language they can hear. The question is how to bring them into a conversation. One way is to speak about decoloniality as an anti-colonial imaginary, and to draw the parallels. That is how the South African struggle worked. Women were inside the anti-apartheid struggle, and this happens in many nationalist struggles: women are inside anti-colonial struggles, and over time they say to the men, “apply this same anti-racist analysis to gender; look, the dynamics you are resisting there are blind spots here.” Then some men

begin to see it. So the task is to bring people into a conversation they can relate to, and then turn the mirror toward them. It is to hold compassion, discernment, and clarity about justice together which is not always easy, because often one is angry. I have to pull myself back, because the question is always: how do you not see this?

Acknowledgments: The authors declare no acknowledgment.

Ethical Approval: This study does not require ethics committee approval.

Declaration of Interests: Betül Özel Çiçek is serving as the Editorial Manager of this journal. We declare that Betül Özel Çiçek had no involvement in the review of this article and has no access to information regarding its evaluation.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Financial Support: The authors declare that this study received no financial support.

Teşekkür: Yazarlar teşekkür beyan etmemiştir.

Etik Beyan: Bu araştırma etik beyan gerektirmemektedir.

Çıkar Çatışması Beyanı: Betül Özel Çiçek, bu derginin Sorumlu Yazı İşleri Müdürü olarak görev yapmaktadır. Betül Özel Çiçek'in bu makalenin değerlendirmesinde hiçbir rol oynamadığını ve makalenin değerlendirilmesine ilişkin bilgilere erişimi olmadığını beyan ederiz.

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: Dış bağımsız çift kör hakemli.

Finansal Destek: Yazarlar bu çalışma için finansal destek almadıklarını beyan etmiştir.

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