

Gender Dynamics in Sufi Rituals, Praxis, and Authority

The previous chapters focused on tracing *sama* through ritual, cultural, and aesthetic expressions in various spaces. This final chapter considers some broader gender dynamics in ritual contexts and also among some of the Sufi communities explored in this book. I first consider how gender norms, especially around the place of women's bodies, have informed Sufi experiences for women. Here, I draw on classical Sufi textual traditions and explore how gender appeared, for instance, in Rumi's poetry and how it later influenced institutional developments within the Mawlawi Order in Turkey. The second half of the chapter considers some of the gender dynamics I encountered during my fieldwork in ritual contexts. In my discussion of *sama* I focus on how the mixed-gender nature of the practice in Canada has led to various transformations and also complicated negotiations between Sufi communities. These Sufi communities include those that trace their lineage back to Feild in Vancouver, as well as others in Toronto, such as the Jerrahi and Rifai orders, that have had to negotiate gender norms and inclusion in their ritual practices. Another gender dynamic that is unfolding in Canada relates to the role of Sufi teachers who are women (*shaykha*). The last section of the chapter focuses on the religious and spiritual authority of two *shaykhas* who are actively leading Sufi communities in Canada: Seemi Ghazi, whose voice has been present throughout this study, for she is one of the institutional leaders of the Vancouver Rumi Society; and Ayeda Husain, a leader in the Inayati Order, based outside Toronto. I centre their voices and narratives to capture their lived experiences of Sufism and explore how they negotiate their gendered identities, be it on their own Sufi path or with other Sufi communities in Canada and around the world.

The presence of *shaykhas* is not unique to the Canadian milieu, and neither is mixed-gender turning; however, as this chapter will show, women Sufi leaders have played a precarious role in the development of Sufism and Islam. In the following discussion, note how gender – especially the presence of women's bodies in ritual contexts – is used to demarcate notions of authentic or real

Sufism in relation to New Age Sufism or Sufism that is deemed non-Islamic or unorthodox. The role of women in Sufi ritual and in authoritative contexts hinges on various other factors, such as endorsements from men leaders in the community and the age of the women leaders. So it behoves one to remember that gender dynamics within Sufi communities are complex and are continually unfolding through various embodied realities that are both individually and collectively negotiated. This line of analysis is also a response to early scholarship on Sufism in North America, which has often presented Sufism as a more gender-egalitarian expression of Islam, especially in the west. As I have suggested in my previous scholarship, this framing is rather pejorative and assumes that Islam defines women's roles in particular restrictive ways (Xavier 2018, 2021). Sufism's relations with women, gender, and the feminine ideal are intricate precisely because there are many configurations through which gender has been conveyed historically, be it at the social or cultural level (i.e., women more as biological entities) or at a metaphysical level that views the feminine (vs the female) as the highest cosmic principle. As such, gender in/and Sufism historically has been ambiguous; it follows that expressions of gendered Sufism in Canada will have retained some of these intricate contestations.

Gender and Sufism Historically

Gender dynamics in the context of Sufism are complex: one can approach gender and women in Sufi history down at least two analytical avenues, as summed up by Maria Massi Dakake:

There are two aspects to the presence of the feminine in the Sufi tradition ... First, there is the metaphysical aspect – that is, the role that the feminine principle plays in symbolic and mystical interpretations of the nature of God and the world. The second aspect of the role of the feminine in the Sufi tradition has to do with the historical role that female practitioners of the mystical path have played in the development and history of Sufism. (2006: 131–2)

The study of Sufism and gender historically can lead to the excavation of anthropological or social experiences of Sufi women, such as through stories of saints and hagiographies. In these texts, the idea of women or the feminine was used as a trope, especially in literary traditions (see below). At the same time, the notion of the feminine was at times tied to a cosmological or spiritual state of being rather than a social or biological identity. These various possibilities coexisted in the early textual traditions of Sufism, which were written when Sufism was being institutionalized in the classical and medieval eras by mostly literate elite men (Ayubi 2019). These sources and their frameworks of women and gender have continued to inform how women and gender are framed in

contemporary Sufism. Thus, as Dakake (2006) adds, “a more feminine mystical view of God does not always entail an active role for human females in the worldly institution of mystical tradition” (132).

For instance, one can engage literary and historical sources, such as hagiographies, to understand the lives of early Sufi women. But in the process one soon finds that men were the authors of most if not all hagiographies or memorials of Sufis. So we learn more about their intentions and biases in their narrations of Sufi women than about the women themselves (Cornell 2019). A good example here is Rabia al-Adawiyya (d. 801) and her legacies, both as myth and as history. Though she predates the period when Sufism becomes institutionalized as a movement, she is often evoked as an early saint or a proto-Sufi. She captures the precursory traditions of asceticism and mysticism that would come to define Sufism’s genesis. In her monumental study of the life and legacy of Rabia, Rkia Cornell (2019) writes that Muslim classical textual traditions of Rabia reflect the impressions and orientations of the authors of these hagiographies, more than the figures they presented:

When medieval male writers of Islamic hagiography used gender-based stereotypes in their depictions of Rabi’a, she is often portrayed as emotional or even hysterical. For example, Ibn al-Jawzi depicts her as crying, weeping and fainting. Such images reinforce the long-held Muslim stereotype of women as deficient in intellect and emotional stability. Such portrayals undermine the image of Rabi’a al-Adawiyya as a wise sage and cause the reader to treat her aphorisms skeptically. (251)

Yet other references to Rabia capture her as wise teacher. For example, Suyyan al-Thawri (d. 778) writes the following in reference to her: “Take me to the teacher (*mu’addiba*). For when I am apart from her, I can find no solace” (qtd in Cornell 2019: 33). Rabia then is portrayed contrarily in literary traditions, as an ascetic, lover, Sufi, and ultimately as a myth:¹

Despite the myth that was created, a “real” Rabi’a of Basra actually did teach, did practice asceticism, and did develop a mystical doctrine that was based (at least in part) on the love of God. This historical figure of Rabi’a is what emerges from the earliest accounts. In historiographical terms, to assume that Rabi’a was nothing but a myth would be to deny the very possibility of using tradition as a source for history. (qtd in 218–19)

In such entries, the inclusion of early mystic figures like Rabia in hagiographical traditions comes with qualifications so as to contend that Rabia’s gender was not a hindrance to the ultimate goals of the path of Sufism. The most famous account of Rabia was written by Farid ud-Din Attar (d. 1221), the Persian biographer and a Sufi. Attar writes:

If anyone says, “Why have you included Rabe’a [Rābī’a] in the rank of men?” my answer is, that the Prophet himself said, “God does not regard your outward forms.” The root of the matter is not form, but intention, as the Prophet said, “Mankind will be raised up according to the intentions.” Moreover, if it is proper to derive two-thirds of our religion from A’isha [A’isha], surely it is permissible to take religious instruction from a handmaid of A’isha. When a woman becomes a “man” in the path of God, she is a man and one cannot any more call her a woman. (qtd in Küçük 2015: 107)

There are many hagiographies of early proto-Sufi and Sufi women; often, though, these sources’ authors had to negotiate the stories of the women they included, sometimes by turning against their gender. This writing strategy or trope often entailed tethering them to a Sufi figure who was a man, such as a husband or father; other times, these women Sufis were presented as asexualized or non-gendered (male) in what Arezou Azad (2013) has framed as “reversed genderizations.” Still, Cornell (2019) notes that “most Sufi women are depicted in hagiographical accounts as supporting the status quo, including gender distinctions, rather than opposing them” (253). Despite all this, historians have highlighted that “from the second/eighth century onwards, there were Sufi women who directed convents, that is, a *tekke* or *zāwiya*, or attended a *tekke* and succeeded to the position of spiritual director or shaykh after performing the duties of the shaykh of the *tekke*” (Küçük 2013: 112). One such female Sufi was Hafsa bint Sirin (d. 719 or 728); also, Ibn Arabi references Zawayatu Aisha in Damascus and Dar al-Falak in Baghdad; both were spaces for Sufi women (Küçük 2015: 112, 114).

Another approach to understanding the role of gender in classical Sufi traditions is through the idea of the feminine principle. Metaphysical or cosmological traditions of Sufism have called attention to the ways in which the “feminine” represents a cosmic principle of Sophia or wisdom, which may have been perfected in figures like Maryam, the mother of Isa or Fatima, the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter.² These instances point to traditions developed by classical Sufi thinkers like Ibn Arabi and Rumi (see below), who argued for the metaphysical necessity of Eve for Adam’s capacity to truly know God. Adam was the first human to truly love God, but he needed Eve, without whom he would not have had the capacity to encounter the Divine, according to scholars like Sa’diyya Shaikh (2012). In Sufism, then, a gender binary is cultivated, especially in metaphysical discussions of masculine and feminine principles, though these gender binaries are not necessarily defined in biological terms. William Chittick (1983) understands these complex portrayals of women in classical Sufi traditions of Rumi’s poetry in this way:

Like other traditional metaphysical and cosmological teachings, Sufism divides the realities of existence into active and passive, male and female, yang and yin.

Thus the Creator is masculine and active in relation to creation, which is female and receptive. Within the created order, the Universal Intellect or "Supreme Pen" (*al-qalam al-ālā*) is active, writing the objects of its knowledge in the Universal Soul or "Guarded Tablet" (*al-lawh al-mahfuz*), thereby bringing the individual creatures into existence. Likewise heaven or the spiritual world is active in relation to earth, the material world. (163)

The binary of masculine and feminine resulted in a tiered metaphysical and social gender hierarchy, wherein the feminine gender was elevated and praised as the ideal (Lover) or as the ideal spiritual state on the Sufi path that all must achieve (both men and women), while at the same time a social and biological female (i.e., socially constructed women) was disparaged. Women represented the lower *nafs*, or the lower soul.³ Rumi, then, like many of his medieval colleagues, conformed at times to reductive tendencies as they related to women (for example, writing "First and last my fall was through woman"), while also subverting gender norms (Schimmel 1992: 96). One encounters these paradoxical trends in Rumi's poetry when he writes: "In the view of the intellect, heaven is the man and earth the woman: Whatever the one throws down the other nurtures" (qtd in Chittick 1983: 163). Chittick adds that "If man were to rejoin his primordial perfection, his intellect would once again play a masculine role, and his ego would live in harmony with it as its feminine mate" (164). Here, we see Rumi tether the ego to Eve and thus to a woman: "If duality were to leave our heart and spirit for a moment, our intellect would be Adam, our ego Eve" (qtd in 163). Chittick understands Rumi's logics this way: "Since the two sexes reflect these two universal principles of activity and passivity, men have a certain innate affinity with the intellect, while women are more directly coloured by the ego. Nevertheless, this does not mean that any given man is more dominated by the intellect than any given woman, since here it is primarily a question of form and not meaning" (163).

Often in Rumi's poems, one finds men described symbolically as "spiritual warriors," while women are "lackluster worldlings" (163). However, Chittick contends that the concept of men and women is not necessarily tied to sex or gender but rather to states of being: "Rūmī's verses often follow the symbolism of this cosmological scheme, so that 'men' are symbols of the saints and 'women' are symbols of the unbelievers. In other words, he (or she) who is dominated by the intellect is a 'man,' while he (or she) who is dominated by the ego is a 'woman.' Hence 'men' look at meanings, while 'women' are caught up in forms" (163).

Again, the gender binary of masculine and feminine is at times subverted, especially when referring to states of being, while at other times that binary reinforces a hierarchy wherein the woman is associated with an egoic (disparaged) state and the man is tied to rationality and "intellect." Chittick suggests

that these tropes can be read in yet another way: “Although from this point of view femininity is negative because of its affinity with the ego and worldliness, from another point of view it is positive, since it reflects and displays God’s beauty, Gentleness and Mercy” (163). Another poem by Rumi reads as follows:

The woman always desires the necessities of the household – reputation,
bread, food and position.
Like a woman, the ego sometimes displays humility and sometimes
seeks leadership to remedy its plight.
The Intellect, indeed, knows nothing of these thoughts: its mind
contains naught but longing for God.
Know that your ego is indeed a woman – it is worse than a woman,
for the woman is part of evil, your ego the whole. (qtd 165).

Rumi’s concepts of masculine and feminine, and the symbolism of man and woman, often serve as literary tropes or tools in his poetry. They also reinforce important metaphysical and cosmological principles that are central to Sufi constructions of femininity. For Dakake (2006), then, “the feminine represents that which is deficient in man – his weakness and his desire for the world – with the world itself being symbolized as feminine temptress,” and the feminine also comes to represent the *dhat* (Essence) (133). Thus,

the *nafs* attracts men to the world with a false and fleeting, if manifest, beauty; while the *Dhāt* attracts with Its perfect, eternal, and infinitely unmanifest beauty. If the *nafs*, like a prostitute, is bold and quick to reveal ugliness that lies below here glided surface, the *Dhāt*, is silent and still, like a chaste woman, only revealing a glimpse of Its beauty to those who are patient and worthy. If the *nafs* hides its ugliness behind the veil of deceit, the *Dhāt* preserves its sacredness behind an existential veil. (134)

On the Sufi path, then, in order for one to access one’s true essence (*dhat*), the lower self (*nafs*) must be annihilated. Only in this way can the tension be transcended between these spiritual processes, which often ascribe gendered norms in which women are the negative. Still, “given that both the passionate soul and the Divine Essence are connected with the feminine, human women could serve as symbols of both that which is lowest in man and that which is most sublime in God” (134–5). One encounters this tendency often, when certain holy female figures, such as Maryam, the mother of Jesus, are viewed as exemplars of the true metaphysical state of the feminine or even humanity: “Except rarely, when a Rustam is hidden within a woman’s body, as in the case of Mary” (Rumi, qtd in 165).⁴ In metaphysical terms, then, the state of the ideal woman is the ultimate goal of all humans. The state of negating the lower self

(*nafs*) leads to the state of *insan al-kamil* or the perfected human being. Unlike *rajul* (men), *insan* refers to man in a universal human sense. It follows that, by some interpretations, this perfected spiritual state, which is the goal of Sufism, is accessible to all of humanity (Dakake 2006; Sharify-Funk et al. 2017; Schimmel 1992: 103). This is expressed by Rumi when he writes: “If one could become a ‘man’ by virtue of beard and testicles, Every buck would have sufficient hair and beard” (qtd in Schimmel 1992: 103).

In some Sufi frameworks, then, gender has not always been defined as a biological category; it has also been used to evoke metaphysical states of being.⁵ These complex tendencies toward genderization in Sufism have led to an oscillation of gendered norms and praxis in both literary traditions and lived realities. So while women are disparaged and tied to the lower self, there are also occasions when women – or at least those women who represent the ideal feminine – are elevated and valued as exemplars on the Sufi path, as is obvious in the following extract from Rumi:

The Prophet said that women totally dominate the men of intellect and
 Possessors of Hearts,
 But ignorant men dominate women, for they are shackled by the
 ferocity of animals.
 They have no kindness, gentleness, or love, since animality
 dominates their nature.
 Love and kindness are human attributes, anger and sensuality
 belong to the animals.
 She is the radiance of God, she is not your beloved. She is the
 creator— you could say that she is not created. (qtd in Chittick
 1983: 169)

So Dakake (2006) writes: “Thus from Rumi’s perspective, woman could symbolize, on one level, the more negative qualities of humankind, and on the other level she could be seen as the ‘radiance of God’ even as the ‘Creator’ – perhaps alluding to the creative nature of the Divine *rahma*” (135). Other textual traditions capture further lived realities of Sufi women, through men’s voices.

Ibn Arabi was known to have trained with various women teachers, including Fatima bt. Ibn al-Mutanna (d. 1198–99?) (in Seville, Al-Andalus) and Sams Umm al-Fuqara (Yasamin) (in al-Andalus). These two women were teachers with miraculous abilities (Küçük 2012b). He also references his family members, including his mother (Nur al-Ansariyya) and his two sisters (elder sister Umm Ala and Umm Sad) (489). Ibn Arabi was inspired by the figure of Nizam (Ayb al-Sams wa-l-Baha), who was the muse for his poetry *The Translator of Desires* (Sells 2021). Of Nizam he wrote that she was “a sun among the scholars,” “a garden among the literary man,” and “a distinguished woman from

among the worshippers, scholars, and ascetic” (qtd in Küçük 2012: 703). Ibn Arabi explains in his *Diwan* that he invested fifteen people with initiation, of whom fourteen were women, and also suggests that one of his women students, a daughter of Zaki l-Din, was given permission to initiate other students, including men and *jinn*s (spirits). This has led some scholars to hold that Ibn Arabi appointed her as his successor, adding: “Follow my way and style. My way is the Prophet’s way” (Küçük 2012:707). Küçük writes the following of Ibn Arabi’s teachings:

According to Ibn al-‘Arabi, women and men are equal to each other in everything varying from being the substitutes of God on earth to being the *Qutb*, the chief-saint at the top of the saints’ pantheon. In fact, according to him, since woman is created from the costal bone of man, a woman is primarily a man and then a woman. And his love towards her can be deemed as “love of the whole world (*al-kull*) towards its part (*guz*).” To him, a woman is the complementary half of man’s gnosis of God. That is, without her, he cannot know of God completely, since half of God’s attributes are located in the woman. (688)

These writings by Ibn Arabi on gender have driven much academic study on gender in relation to Ibn Arabi, with varying opinions among scholars (Murata 1992; Shaikh 2012). Of course, such examples of the elevation of Sufi women, even if it is by men, must be considered in light of other notable discussions about the place of women from that era, such as this statement from al-Ghazali in the twelfth century: “Consider the state of the God-fearing women and say (to your soul), ‘O my soul, be not content to be less than a woman, for a man is contemptible if he comes short of a woman, in respect to her religion and (her relation) to this world’” (qtd in Formichi 2020: 23). Also, Al-Ghazali writes in his *Ihya*: “If your lower self finds it difficult to follow the example of these great male Sufis, now I will offer you some account of female Sufis. You should blame your lower self if it falls below a woman in religious and worldly attainments” (qtd in Küçük 2015: 110). Some scholars have argued that it was the institutionalization of Sufism during the medieval period that led to gender segregation and, in turn, to the less visible presence of women Sufi authority:

After centuries of practicing ascetism, being disciples of great masters, and participating (sometimes leading) community gatherings of *dhikr* (“remembrance” of God), by the twelfth century women disciples and their male masters were compelled to explore new ways to properly and “legally” pursue initiation ceremonies in their tariqas without any direct touching. But by the fourteenth century social norms of segregation had taken over in the institutionalized mystic orders. (Formichi 2020: 24)

The institutionalization of Sufi orders, especially spatially in the medieval period, and the development of particular ritual and spiritual practices, such as seclusion (for retreats or *chilla*), may have led to the marginalization of women's involvement in these emerging Sufi practices:

In early centuries ascetic Islam had privileged the “ethical vision” of the Qurʾān (to embrace Leila Ahmed's analysis), thus allowing women to thrive in their circles, but the institutionalization of Sufi orders, with the secluded life of the isolated *khanaqas* and the paramount importance assigned to the relationship between teacher and pupil, women were pushed out of this world. (84)

As such, gender norms were implicated by other sociological factors that demarcated women as mothers, wives, and daughters, and it is within these gendered identities that Sufi women asserted their practices and roles (Silvers 2014: 29; Buturović 2001: 148). Amila Buturović (2001) explains that “Sufi women's participation in the mystical path was never simple: rather ... it was predicated on their ability to navigate ... social constructions – Sufi and non-Sufi alike – of gender and public/private space” (135). These opportunities for women's participation, even informally and in private domains, have been documented within the development of Sufism. The above shift in the role of Sufi women and in the authority they held was noted as a trend also in the institutionalization of the Mawlawi Order of Rumi.⁶

Women, Authority, and the Mawlawi Order

It seems that Shams, Rumi's spiritual master, felt that women were unqualified for the position of spiritual authority. In a conversation with Rumi, he reputedly said: “You mean that it would be better if a man becomes a shaykh. No, I mean much more than that. I mean this is definitely not for women. Either in place or out of place, I would change my faith in the Prophet Muhammad, had Hadrat Fatima [d.11/632] and 'A'isha become shaykhs. Thank God, they did no such a thing” (qtd in Küçük 2015: 125).

It would also seem, however, that Shams's opinion of women holding positions of authority (if this is indeed an accurate account), and even achieving sainthood, did not deter Rumi, and the Mawlawi Order that developed posthumously from investing women with spiritual and institutional authority. According to Küçük (2015), that order was “woman-friendly” because of Rumi's own position on women: “Rumi sees women as superior beings compared to men, citing the following verse from the Qurʾān: ‘Fair in the eyes of men is the love of things they covet. Women and sons, heaped-up hoards of gold and silver’” (116). Notwithstanding his complicated and at times contradictory tropes of women in his poetry, Rumi had numerous women disciples,

such as Nizam Khatun and Gumaj Khatun; he also seemed to have actively trained some of his daughters-in-law (117–18). Records indicate that “women in Konya used to gather at their homes and ... invite Rumi to their meetings because he was very well disposed towards them” (118). Sultan Walad, the son and a successor of the Mawlawi Order, had men and women students (Küçük 2012: 44). By the fifteenth century, “Sufism experienced much repression at the hands of the exoteric scholars (‘ulamā’), partially as a consequence of urbanization” (Küçük 2015: 115). Women’s public authority often depended on men (husbands, brothers, or fathers), though a few orders, such as the Mawlawi and the Bektashi, did continue to appoint *shaykhas*, even if only as ancillary leaders (Küçük 2015: 115). There were also women descendants or *inath chalabis/chelebis*, who are significant for the Mawlawi lineage (*silsila*) (118). Arifa-yi Khwush-liqa-yi Qunawi was the “first officially appointed female Mawlawi substitute” for the son of Sultan Walad, Ulu Arif Chalabi (d. 1319) in Tokat (119).

Also, the Mawlawi tradition includes stories of women substitutes who were appointed as *shaykhas* in instances when sons were too young to take over, as in the case of Dastina Khatun (d. 1630), or when husbands had retreated from their tasks as *shaykhs*, as in the case of Gunash Khan in the seventeenth century (120–1). There are also occurrences of *shaykhas*: Kamila Khanim became one after the death of Sultan Mehmed III, as did her daughter, Khwaja Fatima Khanim (d. 1710). Both were *shaykhas* of the Mawlawi *khana* of Kutahya (121). In her reading of Gölpınarlı, one of the writers of the Mawlawi history, Küçük summarizes the overall position of women in the Mawlawi tradition:

It seems that during the early years when the Mawlawi Sufi tradition had first spread to the villages, women were not excluded from society and were not considered inferior to men, at least in villages where the Mawlawi Sufis flourished. Nevertheless, due to the Mawlawi Order’s direct relation with the state in the social context of the institution of charitable endowments (*waqf*) and its consequent connect with the position of Shaykh al-Islam, the Mawlawis had to restrict women’s positions in the order. After the seventeenth century, we no longer encounter any female Mawlawi *shaykhs*, just as we do not encounter any village *Mawlawikhanas* [centres]. In spite of everything, Mawlawi women obtained a fairly high position in the Mawlawiyya, at least in comparison with other Orders. Mawlawi women could wear special costumes and could perform the Mawlawi whirling ritual (*samā’*), sometimes even together with elderly Mawlawi Dadas [men] accompanied by the *nay* and *qudum*. But this was allowed only as a form of consolation: Mawlawi etiquette rituals had taken their final shape with men all leading positions, leaving no room for women to initiate others into the order, perform seclusion, or even enter Mawlawi ritual square. (126)

According to this understanding, then, much of the transition toward restricting women's authority and involvement in Mawlawi institutional and ritual life came during a time of contestation between religious authorities and Sufi teachers regarding the role of Sufism and the validity and theological appropriateness of ritual practices such as *sama*. Women's marginalization was a response to these broader theological and legal issues, a trend that is notable in Canada today (see below) (126). Still, occasional voices of Sufi women in the Mawlawi tradition can be found. Writing in the eighteenth century, Fatima Hanum, a student of Rumi and the mother-in-law of Sahik Dede, wrote the following *ghazal*:

We have friendship with God and we are the Mevlevi!
 We are intoxicated by the mystical secrets revealed in the *Mathnawi*!
 Like the reed flute, we journey through *maqams* [spiritual stations]
 into spiritual awakening,
 Ecstatic longing leads us, bliss and love fill us!
 We follow the way of our Pir not as strangers,
 We are intimate companions on the caravan of True Reality!
 Without falling or rising, we transcend space into the unseen world.
 We are born travelers, and our camels are rays of light.
 O Fatima, be like the sun set on its solitary path!
 We have friendship with God, and we are the Mevlevi!
 (qtd in Reinhertz 2001: ix)

Also, miracles were associated with women in the Mawlawi Order:

One of Rumi's chief disciples was Fakhr an-Nisa, known as "the Rabi'a of her age." One day, seven centuries after her death, it was decided to reconstruct her tomb. Shaikh Suleyman Hayati Dede, who was then the acting spiritual head of the Mawlevi Order, was asked to be present when she was exhumed. He later described that, when her body was uncovered, it was totally intact and the fragrance of roses filled the air. (Sultanova 2011: 46)

The challenge entailed in archival excavations of Sufi women and studies of Sufi textual traditions is that even in secondary literature (of the sort what I have cited above), scholars assert their own lines of inquiry, consciously or otherwise, the result being normative or "straight" (as opposed to queer) readings of gendered histories of Sufism (Kasmani 2022). More simply, modern-day studies of Sufism and gender sometimes say much more about scholars' orientations than about the topic being studied. My own scholarship is not absolved from this. It is useful, then, to foreground that we all bring our training and disciplinary subjectivities into our analyses of gender and Sufism (or any field of study, for that matter). Despite all the shifts in women's positionality in

medieval and premodern Sufism and the varied approaches to studying these dynamics, contemporary studies of Sufi women continue to be shaped by gendered authority and ritual practices, albeit with some negotiation.

Living Traditions of Sufi Women

Women's authority has been formative for ritual contexts. It is often tied to sacred spaces or patriarchal familial connections. For instance, studies such as those by Razia Sultanova illustrate the cross-fertilization between Sufi ritual practices – especially of music and poetry – and Indigenous traditions of shamanism and Zoroastrianism in Central Asia. In her ethnographic research, Sultanova found that in Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan, women were at the forefront of these traditions, leading rituals, teaching, and training Sufi students while preserving oral traditions (Sultanova 2011). One notes similar ritual presence and authoritative roles for women in various other Sufi communities across the Muslim world, such as among the Bektashis, “an order in which women have always been integrated with men in ceremonies, many women have continued the tradition of composing sacred songs [*illahis*]” (Sultanova 2011: 45). And in Turkey, the Mawlawi tradition has a rich and complex history of women's presence, as noted earlier. Scholars have suggested that Rumi initiated women disciples and that some women practised *sama*.⁷ The turning ceremonies were often separate for men and women, though according to some scholars there were rare instances when men and women turned together (Sultanova 2011). Women have been involved in various capacities in South Asia, especially in proximity to Sufi shrines, which have immense social, religious, and economic weight in South Asia. In her discussion of South Asian Sufism, Annemarie Schimmel writes that “in India, the lower Indus Valley and the Punjab are dotted with minor sanctuaries of women saints, either single individuals or whole groups (preferably ‘Seven Chaste Ladies’ or so) who are said to have performed acts of unusual piety. Some are venerated for their chastity, some were blessed with performing miracles and others are noted for their healing properties” (qtd in Formichi 2020: 251).

One often encounters women and non-gender-confirming people at Sufi saints' (*awliya*) shrines, for such sites have always tended to be more gender-inclusive than *masjids* in regions such as South Asia (Kasmani 2022).⁸ These expressions of piety by women and non-binary people may manifest themselves through *sama* performances but may also draw authoritative figures, such as women healers and spiritual leaders (Flueckiger 2006; Pemberton 2004; Abbas 2002; Kasmani 2022).⁹ In other instances, women's authority in Sufism is relative to a familial man's authority who endorses their capacity to lead. Various past and present-day examples can be found of women's leadership that relies on patriarchal familial connection and authorization, be it through a father, a

husband, or a brother, who provides an opening through association for Sufi women to maintain authority. One such example is the life of Nana Asmau (d. 1864), the daughter of Usman dan Fodio (d. 1817), a Qadiri Sufi *shaykh*, in what is modern-day Nigeria. Asmau was educated in Islamic traditions and texts. She trained her numerous students, especially students who were girls and women, in similar textual traditions. Her importance and fame travelled to the Americas with the slave ships, and her legacy is still alive among African Americans, especially in Pittsburgh (Boyd and Mack 2000).

Similarly, Joseph Hill's many publications explore the role of *muqaddama* (feminine of *muqaddam*, which means spiritual guide of the Tijani Sufi order) (2010, 2014, 2018). These women Sufi leaders are able to maintain authority because of their relationships to men family members (i.e., husband or father) who are *muqaddams*. These women develop leadership roles, gather disciples, and even lead rituals, such as *zikr*, even though such roles were often limited to men in this cultural context. Hill (2010) highlights how women in today's Senegal, by oscillating between "domesticity" and "publicity," act as leaders, albeit at the discretion or with the approval of a Sufi *shaykh* who are men in the order (383). Similar studies have noted the importance of women Sufi leaders in Somalia (Declich 2000) and Indonesia (Birchok 2016). Turkey is another place where Sufi women's authority is prominent today. One sees this in popular Turkish *shaykhas* such as Nur Artiran of the Mawlawi Sufi Order, who succeeded her teacher Sefik Can (d. 2005), and Cemalnur Sargut Hoca, a teacher of the Rifai-Jerrahi order (see below) (Sharify-Funk et al. 2017).¹⁰ In Canada, the two Sufi *shaykhas* profiled at the end of this chapter do not rely on familial patriarchal relationships to solidify their authority as teachers and leaders of public rituals and to mentor their students. This broader shift reflects some of the ways in which women's authority in Sufism is emerging in the North American milieu, where it is the discretion of a Sufi *shaykh* (usually a man) that enables women to take on authoritative roles, be it in ritual contexts or in leadership. That said, Sufi women's authority is not entirely dependent on them, as some other studies have indicated.

Contemporary Sufi Women in Canada

Some scholars and adherents of Sufism have suggested that Sufism in western Europe and North America is more gender-egalitarian as a result of westernization and not because of any of Sufism's inherent tendencies. The prevailing view that Sufi women in the west enjoy more access to their faith than women in Islam- or Muslim-majority contexts is far too reductive, in that it ignores the traditions of Islam and Sufism, as well as the experiences of Muslims and Sufis, especially women and gender-diverse people. The American milieu has seen a unique trend in women's religious authority, such as the formation of

women-only mosque spaces, though these are not unique to the modern-day west.¹¹ Gendered religious authority has also emerged, with women and queer imams leading ritual prayers. Perhaps most famous here is the social justice activism of amina wadud, who led mixed-gender prayer in 2005 in America, having previously done so in South Africa.¹² Juliane Hammer (2012) posits that

It is in the North American context that some women have risen to the ranks of prominent Muslim intellectuals. This development can in part be explained through different economic, social, and political opportunities for women, even though gender equality is an ideal more than a reality. It may also be explained by an Orientalist obsession with supporting purportedly oppressed Muslim women in their quest for “liberation” though this liberation may more often take the form of expecting women to shed their religious convictions altogether (103–4).

Sufi women’s authority in North America sometimes arises within the ambit of broader Muslim authority and leadership, though only if the Sufi community is perceived as a Muslim one. In Canada, Muslim women’s bodies continue to be viewed through an “oppressive” lens. Baljit Nagra (2018) has captured how “Muslim women are constructed as romantic heroines who are being oppressed by cruel fathers and trapped in backward cultures” (264). In Canada, as in much of the west, there is still an obsession with Orientalist and Islamophobic portrayals of Muslim women that links them especially to narratives of honour killings or to the global war on terror (264). In response to these global stereotypes, many nations have developed programs and policies to police minoritized racialized communities, including Muslims. The height of these racist interventionist policies in Canada was, perhaps, Bill 21 in Quebec, which was passed in 2019. That bill banned the wearing of religious symbols in various workplaces. This bill disproportionately targeted Muslim women and Sikh men.

A 2001 census survey of Muslims in Canada found that “only about one quarter of Canadian Muslim women were born in Canada, while three times as many were born abroad”; thus, immigrant Muslim women in Canada are also informed by their “socio-cultural and religious understandings of Islam, be it a Bengali, an Egyptian, a Somali, an Iranian, a Pakistani, or an Indonesian understanding of Islam” (Marcotte 2010: 357). The experiences of Muslim women in Canada, of course, are immensely diverse (religiously and culturally), and various organizations have been founded – such as the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) – that focus on social justice and provide resources for Canadian Muslim women (358). Canadian Muslim women are politically and socially active. The nature of Muslim women’s piety in Canada has yet to be closely examined. Some studies suggest that in some Sunni Muslim mosques, a trend is developing toward more restrictive

gender norms. For instance, “in 1994, 52% of Canadian mosques had partitions between men and women, but by 2000 that number had climbed to 66%, maintaining an upward trend that does not appear to be declining” (359). Mosques are playing new roles in the diaspora. for they are sites that can help “develop and strengthen ... ties [to] religious and ethnic communities. The mosque often serves as a social and cultural center” (359).¹³ In these discussions of Muslim women and their experiences in Canada, we only sometimes find representations of Muslim women’s Sufi experiences, especially in ritual contexts. These discussions largely avoid acknowledging any sectarian diversity (for instance, that Ismaili prayer spaces have long maintained women’s presence and authority). This chapter is a step toward addressing that lacuna. Of course, the dearth of discussion of Sufism in these particular discourses reminds us that Sufism is not viewed as representing Muslim women’s experiences in Canada and in Islam more generally. People, including members of other Muslim communities, often examine the dynamics of gender regulation in Sufi communities to ascertain those groups’ relationship to Islam – that is, as a means to measure a group’s authenticity in relation to Islam. Sufi communities that are categorized as New Age or non-Muslim universal are often not seen as legitimate Muslim communities, which means that women’s roles and authority in them are viewed as less problematic because they are not “really” Islamic spaces anyway. At this point one begins to notice how, within Sufi and broadly Muslim communities, women’s bodies are used to bolster broader theological and religious arguments regarding the orthodoxy and legitimacy of Sufism itself.

Despite these external pressures, today as in the past we continue to find Sufi women active in various public and private roles. They work with other Sufi teachers (men), they travel, and they cater to their communities both locally and globally, publicly and privately. They have blog pages, Facebook groups, Twitter handles, and Instagram accounts. No longer are they simply being written about; now they are speaking for themselves, and those who are interested can access them directly rather than through mediators (usually). None of this is necessarily new; instead, it can be seen as a continuation of classical and premodern trends, as noted earlier. Some modes of leadership are innovative, largely due to new technologies. These tools have influenced how authority is dispersed and experienced, such as through social media. Turning to Canada, two overarching modes of women’s role in Sufism can be seen, first of ritual involvement (namely during *sama*) and then of formal authority. The second half of this chapter considers some of these issues. They were alluded to in earlier chapters, but here I engage them directly and consider how various members of Sufi communities are negotiating these dynamics. I begin with ritual practices, especially of *zikr* and *sama*, and women’s role in them.

Gender Norms and Ritual Practices

There are diverse ways to study gender in Sufism in Canada. One way is to reflect on gendered expressions during ritual performances. Sufi communities, such as the Naqshbandi Haqqani Kabbani in Vancouver and the Jerrahi Order in Toronto, maintain gender-segregated spaces, especially during community gatherings and in ritual contexts (i.e., *zikr*). *Shaykh* Nurjan Mirahmadi of the Naqshbandi Haqqani Kabbani discusses women's inclusion and access in his community, comparing it to that of other Muslim communities:

We were talking about the traditional Islamic centres ... the Afghani Centre, the Pakistani Centre, and they eat and there's food and a lot of their programs are based on their cultural background and how they run the mosque is all cultural and women are in the corner or in the closet and men are *here* ... But that's not the traditional way and it's not the traditional teaching [of] Sufism. Its miraculous nature is diversity, and we have every type of background, so you have to first teach people good manners, so when guests are coming be good to them because they're all coming in new and they can see how we teach. The women are here and you get to see the teacher, they get to experience the teacher, and at a lot of Islamic centres they sort of block them away and that's not working very well, especially because this generation of ... girls are going to school.¹⁴

Mirahmadi explains that many of the issues of gender inaccessibility for women in Muslim communities in Vancouver are largely cultural in nature and do not reflect Muslim or Sufi gender practices. He views gender inclusion as a return to traditional practices of Islam and Sufism. Other communities, such as the Inayati Order across Canada and the Nimatullahi Order in Toronto, do not practise gender segregation during rituals or gatherings. The role of women in ritual and community life was one factor that led to a split between the Jerrahi and Rifai communities in Toronto.¹⁵ *Shaykh* Murat Coskun has cultivated a gender-inclusive Sufi community. For him, neither gender nor sexual orientation has any bearing on one's journey on the Sufi path: "To me, *ruh* is sexless, *ruh* is colourless. So, every human being is a gift from Allah."¹⁶ This egalitarian approach has drawn criticism from other Sufi communities in Toronto, specifically from the Jerrahi Order, a community with which the Rifais share some history: I asked Coskun about push-back from other Sufi communities with regard to gender-egalitarianism:

They're not happy because ... we are changing ... The first ones always get the stones, you see? So, if we were a bit diluted, I call it like New Age group, nobody would bother us. But I follow the Sufi traditions strictly, the *zikr*, the prayers, the

fasting, the *shariat* [law], and I'm introducing women into the stage and it's our other half. So, the Jerrahis ... are always criticizing us since we left them because of this reason and there are other groups who say it is wrong ... I didn't come here to fight for women either. I took on the work ... that Kenan Rifai started a hundred years ago and I'm continuing it still and as you see, there is still a lot of work to be done for women to be accepted. But ... most recent criticism [is from] a professor in Turkey, and they had a big *shaykh*, that we are getting away from Islam by doing this, by taking women into our *zikr* and into our prayers. I sent a message back; I said tell them to strengthen their *iman* [faith] so when they see a woman they don't lose their relationship with Allah. I don't know how they took it [laughing]. I didn't hear from him. But it's that, at the end it comes to that, really, like, if your *iman* is so loose and if you see a woman and start thinking of those things instead of your connection to Allah, you'd better strengthen that because you cannot forever keep your temptations hidden. Do you understand?¹⁷

Coskun's biweekly gatherings include *zikr* and *meskh* (sacred concerts). At times, the gathering also includes *samazens*, either those who are dervishes initiated with Coskun, such as his son, or those from Rumi Canada (like Farzad AttarJafari). During *zikr*, men and women sit in one circle together, with no separation of gender. This is different from what one sees in the weekly *zikr* gatherings of Jerrahi Sufi Order, where women sit in a separate balcony area and men sit in the main gathering space of the *dargah* in a circle with *shaykh* Tevfik Aydoğan. Still, Coskun is clear that his Sufi order follows Islamic law and that if they were a "New Age" group they would likely not have faced criticism from other Muslim Sufi groups. Even Sufi communities in Turkey have reproached Coskun for his gender-egalitarian practices in Toronto. Coskun's wife (Talar), who often sits next to or near Coskun at the head of the circle, usually begins *zikr* with her soft singing; the group's singers are a mix of women, men, and non-gender-conforming dervishes. Interestingly, then, it is the following of Islamic practices, such as praying five times a day and fasting for Ramadan, that has brought this community's legitimacy into question. If they framed themselves as a New Age or non-Muslim Sufi order, they would not face pushback, because they would not technically be seen as real Sufis, at least by other Muslim Sufis. In this instance, women's bodies and gender norms serve as a litmus test for ascertaining the legitimacy of Sufi communities. This is even more the case in North America, where Sufi communities are judged by their degree of *Islamicness*. As Marcia Hermansen writes:

To the degree that Islamic shari'a-based rituals are incorporated by hybrid or Islamic Sufi Orders, gender distinctions may become visibly operative [in] America. In the more strictly Islamic Sufi movements such as the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Order led in the United States by Shaykh Hisham Kabbani women participate in the gender segregated rituals but are not accorded formal leadership roles. Female

members of the leaders' families are viewed as the role models for women disciples. In the case of many American Sufi women, gender segregation and other restrictions on female participation are likely to provoke some discomfort. It is noteworthy that when Western women visit Sufi teachers in the Muslim world they are often accorded privileges of the shaykh's company and occupying male spaces denied to local females. The symbolic masculinization of Sufi women in American Orders may include adopting symbols of affiliation and authority that had been traditionally unique to men such as wearing special caps or robes. (Hermansen 2006: paras. 8 and 9).

Especially in Sufi communities in North America, women's role, presence, and embodiment in ritual contexts has become one means to ascertain a Sufi community's Islamic legitimacy, as Hermansen explains. So it would seem that where Islamic law and precepts are practised, gender segregation must follow. Sufi communities like Coskun's frame their understanding of gender norms within metaphysical Sufi traditions to support their practice. As Coskun explains, the essential soul or *ruh* is not gendered, and therefore the outward form should not matter. He traces his gender-egalitarian practices back to Kenan Rifai, a Sufi teacher who lived during a transitional period between the end of the Ottoman Empire and the beginning of the Turkish secular republic. Rifai's mother, Hatice Cenani, influenced his spiritual path in Sufism and introduced him to his spiritual teacher *shaykh* Edhem Efendi. Rifai's understanding of women was foundational for the inclusion of women in his community. He writes:

For centuries so many things were told and written, and so many bloody adventures were attempted for the sake of women. Sometimes her name was used as a means of unbonded ambitions and was sometimes delivered as a flag to the hands of virtue. But none of the mentalities, or the philosophies have been able to appreciate her and to determine her actual place as much as Islamic mysticism. No matter how much the way is regarded by Islam is distorted due to personal benefits through the centuries, the value given to women can not be doubted. The greatest evidence of this is in the Kuran [Qur'an]. In the Book all the addressing is given without any discrimination as "muminin and muminat, [believer] salihin and salihat" [pious] Muminine and salihah women are not separated from mumin and salih men. In the early periods of Islam, women accompanied men in every phase of social life. She even actively joined gazas (war of Islam) (in "His Understanding of Woman").¹⁸

Referring back to Rumi's poem (cited earlier) that places woman as a "creator," Rifai asks, "Where does the significance that Islam gives to women come from?" His answer is that it arises from her creative capacity, which is divinely

endowed; he adds that “love (muhabbet) for woman is because of being able to witness God in mirror-like existence of woman” (“His Understanding of Woman”).¹⁹ As Coskun explained earlier, this is dependent on one’s faith (*iman*), or, according to Rifai, on one’s spiritual knowledge (*irfan*) (“His Understanding of Woman”). Rifai’s mother, and Semiha Cemal as well, were formative teachers in his understanding of the role of women not only for the Sufi path but for all of creation. Today, this authority of women is seen in his successor Cemalnur Sargut, who was also a student of Samiha Ayverdi (d. 1993) and was taught by her mother Meskure Sargut.²⁰ In an interview, Cemalnur Sargut explained the role of gender in Sufi authority:

I think the guide can be neither a woman nor a man. They must be someone who has surpassed the gender ... Of course, the woman will not lose their femininity and the man won’t lose from their masculinity, but ... the guide can only be the one who does not bring their gender to the fore, the one who doesn’t remember it. The one who knows their student as their child ... even if they are of the same age, the one who knows the student as a child and struggles for them ... in truth, I believe that a guide is one who serves their children. (qtd in Sharify-Funk et al. 2017: 237)²¹

Scholars have noted how Turkish Sufism, both in Turkey and in North America, has had flexible gender norms, as evident in Kenan Rifai’s community, which includes successors who are women. A similar trend toward gender inclusion, in both ritual contexts and leadership positions, is evident in some lineages of the Mawlawi Order, as seen with the inclusion of mixed whirling by Suleyman Loras (and the Vancouver Rumi Society) and the Halveti-Jerrahi of Muzaffer Ozak, especially the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Order.²²

Ozak came to the United States in the 1970s and established three separate branches: those of Nur al-Jerrahi (Lex Hixon) and Tosun Bayrak in upstate New York, and that of Ragib (Robert) Frager in the San Francisco area. Hixon’s group (Nur Ashki Jerrahis) developed into a lineage that now has *shaykha* Fariha Fatima al-Jerrahi as its head in New York City; Aydoñer’s Jerrahi Order in Toronto traces its lineage back to Bayrak in upstate New York. So it is noteworthy that even within a predominantly Turkish lineage, the communities led by Coskun and Aydoñer – one located in the Rifai tradition (but with early linkages to the Jerrahis) and the other located in the Jerrahi tradition – have developed different ritual approaches to women. Aydoñer’s community, which follows *sharia* practices and is rooted in Turkish Sufism, has a predominantly immigrant Turkish and eastern European Muslim membership. This ethnic and cultural composition of the Sufi community in Toronto may have led to more gender separation in ritual practices, as seen in public presentations of *sama* in [chapter 3](#); the opposite happened with Coskun’s community.

I want to add that though women may have a segregated presence and ritual involvement and no formal leadership opportunities in this particular Jerrahi community, it does not follow that the women who belong to this Sufi group do not find agency there. For them, to be included (even if segregated) is itself agentic, when considered in light of other Muslim spaces (be they Sufi or non-Sufi) where they are not readily welcomed or spatially privileged (a point made earlier by Mirahmadi). I do not want to dismiss these experiences, given that they are personally defined. In the end, according to Coskun, the metaphysical realities of spiritual states require one to look beyond social or biological notions of gender. He explained that the masculine and feminine qualities of Allah (*esma* in Turkish) need to be refined for everyone, not just for women:

Since we accepted Allah contains everything that he created, he has masculine and feminine qualities. But on this planet for our survival we have to have the sexes so some of the *esmas* [names or qualities of Allah] are polarized in male and female, do you understand? Let's say the strength went to the men; the motherhood went to the women ... I'd give examples, a mother's love to a kid is unconditional. A father may not be like that ... But a mother, even if I go out and kill a hundred people, my mother would still love me. So, this is a quality of Allah that has given it as a present to females. And not only in human beings ... even in most mammals we see these qualities. So, it's an *esma* of Allah, obviously ... It completes the human being, male and female. So ... with our part in this we become one, a whole. So how can I deny my mother, my sister, my wife, my daughter from what I am enjoying the most in this life, or put them on a balcony and say you are not allowed here, just watch it? So, I added to the letter [sent to a Turkish critic], I said what kind of unity they are talking about that they cannot come together with their own other half. So, if I'm an alien coming to a *zikir*, I will only think that ... only male exists in these species, women are non-existent, and unfortunately, this is true in a mosque, this is also true in most *dargahs*. But it will change, *inshallah*, in your lifetime and your kids' lifetime it will change.²³

Coskun follows metaphysical principles of masculinity and femininity as qualities that are the attributes or names (*asma* or *esma* in Turkish) of Allah that need to be balanced. This informs how he leads his community and ensures not only gender-egalitarian practices but also the inclusion of those with various gender and sexual identities. Coskun's Rifai Sufi order with its gender- and LG-BTQIA+-inclusive space does not reflect the trend found in most Canadian Sufi communities, though groups like the Vancouver Rumi Society and the Inayati Order (see below) also confirm the inclusion of everyone, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. Coskun's community is rare in this way; even so, it is an important thread of Turkish Canadian Sufism as it is developing in the Toronto milieu. For him, it amounts to a return to truly *Islamic* (via Sufi) metaphysics,

or a return to tradition, one that ensures these practices are sustained. Another ritual practice that has received some attention, and at times resistance, is the practice of *sama* and its gender-egalitarian development in Canada.

Gender Dynamics and the Tradition of Turning

Another thread of Turkish Sufi practice in Canada that this book has highlighted is the ritual of turning or *sama*, which is linked with the Mawlawi Order. In her discussion of this practice in North America, Hermansen wrote that “among these disciples are American women who are set on breaking the barrier to female participation in the *dhikr*. Traditional *shaykhs* from Turkey may be pleased that Americans are becoming dervishes but unsettled to be asked to give permission for females to whirl, at least publicly” (2006: para. 11). Feild and Loras introduced the latter practice to the west and let men and women turn together. Speaking of her time with Loras, Shakina Reinhertz (2001) reflected on her experience of this mixed-gendered turning. She understands the tradition as located within Rumi (in the stories of how he taught his daughter-in-law and granddaughters to turn) and highlights the role of women in the Mawlawi *tekke* (xxii). She also traces the genesis of this meditative practice in North America to Sufi Sam and the Dances of Universal Peace (xxii). Lewis was a student of Inayat Khan. Though Khan was a musician, he did not formalize the practice of meditative movement in his communities. Today, however, we see the emergence of *sama* as a practice in the Inayati Order as *samazens* have taken hand (*baya*) with Zia Inayat-Khan. Through Jaleleddin Loras, the son of Suleyman, the practice of mixed-gender turning continued to develop in North America. In Canada, the presence of the *shaykh* Majid Buell, appointed by Loras, and the presence of the *samazanbashi* or *sama* master Raqib Brian Burke meant that the practice would continue through a separate lineage. Burke trained his daughter Mira and students like Tawhida Tanya Evanson and Farzad AttarJafari, who now train men and women in the practice.

In the early stages of this mixed-gender turning, some Sufi leaders in the community were displeased. AttarJafari spoke to me about these dynamics:

Yeah, cause we're very progressive and sometimes we break some rules but we excuse ourselves and we say may Allah help us understand and learn better. Dervish is dervish, there's no female or male in this school, I learned this. And yes, there is a little bit of controversial saying about this ... At the end of the day, that comes into play, and I get it, when you put it in an eastern culture and the context where men hardly get to hang out with women and once in a while you see them, sure, we want to keep them separate, here is irrelevant and there needs to be respect in a safe place and whoever I learn with we always have a boundary to respect it and so people feel safe and come and go. But then, yeah, there was a bit of resistance.²⁴

For AttarJafari, in his understanding of Rumi's teachings he sees no duality, just unity (oneness), which pushes him forward in his gender-egalitarian practice of *sama*. He adds that gender segregation cannot work in Canada, where cultural and social gender segregation is not the norm, though it would perhaps work in some Muslim-majority ("eastern") countries. After years of practising mixed-gender turning, AttarJafari says that some Sufi leaders have slowly become more open to mixed-gender turning while others still have not. Some Sufi teachers do not publicly endorse mixed-gender turning but offer silent support.

Tawhida Tanya Evanson, a Black woman *samazen* in Canada, has encountered fascinating responses to her gender identity as a *samazen* in Canada and in Turkey. She holds that her experience of turning has been defined mostly by Turkish Sufism, which has made space for her presence. Of course, this does not mean there have never been moments of resistance to her presence as a woman *samazen*:

Lots of stories there because I also lived in Istanbul for four years, so, yeah. Within the Rifai Marufi *tariqat* there are no restrictions and in fact *shaykh* Sharif Baba is known as the feminist *shaykh* in Turkey because ... the genders are not separated. Dervish is dervish, you know, it's already post-gendered. So, I think there was a great *kismet* and kind of meeting this group right away because in the encounters with other groups there's been really bizarre resistance and the feeling that how can you say *la illaha illallah* and separate and then name genders and separate them. So, for this one [me] there's just quite a lot of confusion there ... and it's also based on, you know, some rules that were meant for another time period and a lot of people want to hold those traditions so as to not lose anything, but in fact [in] holding on to those traditions much is being lost because there are traditions of separation....²⁵

Evanson highlights that in the Rifai Marufi tradition, Sherif Baba Çatalkaya, whom she is initiated with, has been formative for her experience of a largely "post-gendered" experience of Sufism. Çatalkaya, who is based in Turkey and has a group in Seattle and many students in Vancouver (especially among the Rumi Society), has similarly cultivated a gender-egalitarian practice of Sufism, like that of Coskun, adding that this post-gendered experience is a return to traditional Sufism.²⁶ Both Coskun and Çatalkaya locate their communities within a Rifai lineage by way of Turkey. Evanson's experiences of turning as woman and as a Sufi are captured in her poetry collection *Bothism* (2017). The narratives relayed in this collection oscillate between "post-gendered" experiences of Sufism, especially in ritual contexts, and the reinforcement of gender segregation. The latter is the focus of one story in her collection *Bothism* (2017) titled "The Silent Dervish," in which the protagonist meets *shaykh* (Emre) in Istanbul and is invited to *zikr*:

So she went with him by car. They left Istanbul. Left the city. They drove and drove. One hour later they arrived at a suburban home. Nothing she knew before applied here. The front door of the house swung open and they were welcomed. She covered her head with her red shawl just as they were invited into a large living room. She sat down and waited. The room was full of Turkish-speaking strangers. They tried communicating with her but she could not speak the language and Sheikh Emre had disappeared. Dervishes are always doing that.

[...]

After the food and tea they invited everyone into the basement. She was ushered into a room full of women, covered, silent. Once all the women had been gathered there, the lights were turned off and the door locked. In the darkness and quiet the opening sounds of the *zikruallah* could be heard next door. *Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim. La ilaha illallah, la ilaha illallah, la ilaha illallah, la ilaha illallah ...* [In the Name of Allah, the most compassionate, most merciful, there is no god but Allah]. The chanting of the dervishes. A chorus of voices in worship pulsating through the building. Sonics bubbling up through the floors. Ceilings bursting. Mad male frequencies. Ecstatic frames of *daf* drums, clapping hands, headbanging, whirlings. The air alive, only half. In the room, the women sat without saying a word. Some were in personal prayer, swaying quietly back and forth, thumbing the *tesbih* [prayer beads]. But not allowed to be in the room with the men. Not allowed to witness the ceremony. Not allowed to drum. Not allowed to dance. Yin removed from yang. The circle and dot separate. The opposite of tawhid—unity. The red shawl fell from her head onto the floor. Her mouth opened but no sound came. Sheikh Emre was never seen again. (27–8)

Evanson indicates that there have also been clear traditions of gender-egalitarian practice in Sufism, adding that “dervish is dervish.” AttarJafari and Evanson both express that at the end of the day, any outward form is a limitation, one that denies the unity in the practice of Sufism. Still, Evanson goes on to note that she has experienced similar gender segregation in some Sufi communities in Toronto as well. So it should be evident that even among the various Turkish-based Sufi communities in cities like Toronto, there is no uniform implementation of gender dynamics during Sufi ritual praxis. But the Rifai lineage as reflected in two Rifai orders in Canada – one through Kenan Rifai among the Rifai in Toronto, the other through Sherif Baba Çatalkaya – has cultivated a gender-egalitarian ritual milieu in Sufi communities in Canada and Turkey. Part of this points to the Rifai tradition of Sufism, which has historically maintained a countercultural and subversive antinomian Sufi praxis (Kuehn 2018). In North America and elsewhere, women’s role, especially in Sufi ritual praxis, continues to be negotiated within some Sufi communities, just as it was in the past. In many of the Sufi communities discussed in this book, women are present and involved in ritual spaces and practices to various degrees.

There is another approach to examining gendered norms and practices in Canadian Sufi communities today, especially those that link their practices and communities to Rumi, and that is with regard to the presence of *shaykhas*, or women Sufi leaders. In this final section, then, I shift to the voices of two South Asian Muslim Sufi *shaykhas* in Canada, one in Vancouver and the other outside Toronto. By centring their voices and their narratives, I locate how the authority of the *shaykha* is another formative thread of Sufism in Canada, one that draws from traditional Sufi paradigms while situating them in a new setting.

Sufi *Shaykhas* of Canada²⁷

As part of Nuit Blanche in Toronto in September 2019, a public presentation of *sama* was held at the Ismaili Centre to commemorate Rumi's birthday. Ayeda Husain, a teacher in the Inayati Order, sat at the head of the *zikr* circle and led *zikr* while the *samazens* bowed to her (as the *shaykha*) and the musicians sat behind her. This gathering brought together members of various Sufi communities in Toronto, including the Nimatullahi *shaykh* and several Sufi members from other groups, including the Rifai Order. It is noteworthy that a woman Sufi teacher was leading *zikr* while joined in the circle by men Sufi teachers, live musicians, and *samazens* (who were mixed-gender). In my decade of involvement with and study of Sufi communities in Toronto, this was the first time I had seen a *shaykha* lead *zikr* in a large public gathering. In Vancouver, Seemi Ghazi had held public Sufi gatherings; now Husain has formalized this same praxis and authority as a teacher of the Inayati Order in Toronto. Though led by Zia Inayat-Khan, the Inayati Order has many leadership and official positions held by women. Zia Inayat-Khan initiates women leaders to positions of authority and understands this as a continuation of his grandfather's and father's legacy. Of course, there are Sufi orders in the west, such as the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Order and the Threshold Society, that are helmed by *shaykhas* (Fariha al Jerrahi and Camille Helminski). However, Camille has not been officially appointed as a *shaykha*; instead she serves as the co-director of the Threshold Society. Her husband Kabir was appointed by Celaledin Celebi (d. 1996), a descendent of Rumi who resided in Istanbul (Küçük 2015: 127). It is to Ghazi and Husain's stories that I turn next.

Seemi Ghazi and the Vancouver Rumi Society

I introduced Seemi Bushra Ghazi in [chapter 2](#) while discussing the founding of the Vancouver Rumi Society. So here I avoid repeating her biographical details too much. As already noted, she is a student of the Rifai Marufi Sufi tradition (of Sherif Baba Çatalkaya), but she also draws her lineage from her inherited familial understanding of Sufism in South Asia as well as from her own

academic and intellectual journey. All of this has informed her understanding of the traditions of Sufism, which include engagement with “Quakerism” from her time studying the Quran with Professor Michael Sells, as well as with Ibn Arabi, Cemalnur Sargut, M.R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, and Meister Eckhardt (c. 1328). Ghazi is also a renowned Quran reciter.²⁸ With John Brozak, Raqib Brian Burke, and Majid Buell, she is a founding member of the Vancouver Rumi Society, where she hosts and leads monthly unity *zikr* on the last Fridays of each month (see [chapter 2](#)).

Since COVID-19, these gatherings have moved to Zoom. The small community gatherings (fifteen or so) begin with invocations from Majid Buell and Ghazi’s recitation of passages of the Quran; she then leads *zikr*. Ghazi has led in larger public presentations of *zikr*, such as those that are held during *Shab-i arus* (see [chapter 3](#)), where she has also turned in *sama*. The community she leads is religiously and racially diverse, and is a mix of various genders, though like Ayeda Husain’s community in Toronto (below), it tends to attract more women, likely because a *shaykha* is at its helm. Ghazi is also involved in various Muslim women’s spiritual organizations, such as the Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality. Overall, as with Sufi *shayhkas* in Turkey, who have maintained academic, pastoral, and spiritual roles, Ghazi holds various roles as a Muslim Sufi woman who also happens to be an academic and spiritual leader in Muslim and non-Muslim spaces. We spoke about all of this when we sat down for a conversation at her home in Vancouver. I quote our conversation here at length because it highlights some of her ongoing work in these various arenas and how she has navigated the complexities that have come with it:

GHAZI: I am quiet about what I do, you know?

XAVIER: Yeah. Is it because, I mean is it the path or is it ...

GHAZI: It’s many things. Yeah, one thing is that the real path is hidden, right?

The real teaching is hidden, the real centres are hidden, and many of the real teachers are hidden. You know, so much of the work that we do happens in this very safe, it’s the womb, it’s this nexus, if you open it up to the light, then the process stops. You know what’s happening inside the rose when it’s closed and you don’t want to force that open, right, and that [a] fetus can’t be exposed to the world till it’s ready to be born in a certain form ... I’m probably aware as a woman who traverses many worlds. So I have a really strong clear relationship with say the *masjid*, the Sunni mosques ... Well, I come from a very mixed family actually but we’re Sunni, very traditional Sunnis. Like ... the heart of the heart of Sunnidon, Sunni *ulama*. That’s what I come from and I really have this relationship that’s very respectful and beautiful that I love with the kind of mainstream Muslim community. The Shia mosque will invite me to come and recite an entire *milad* [celebration of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad].

So I have this relationship with them and then I'm also very much involved in universal Sufism and in that context, things are really different, the gender roles are different, you know. I work with Muslims who are LGBTQ. I really love doing spiritual work, healing work, and particularly through the Quran, talking about the Quran in those communities. So, a lot of this is probably you know there's definitely like some mutual non-compatibility in terms of the perspectives of people in these communities and so one of the ways I navigate that is just like quietly doing my thing, right. So jeopardizing that is, something. And then I'm in the academy and I'm not at the school of theology, I'm in religious studies and there's a secular, whatever distinction. So, for example, I have students there [University of British Columbia] and I'm teaching them classical Arabic language and literature and I'm teaching them the Quran and I'm teaching them how to step aside and put a parenthesis around their own belief system and let's take a look at this as literature, let's analyse the grammar, let's look at this historically, that's my role there. But then there's another context in which what I'm doing is really like pastoral work and so probably being low-key and under the radar temperamentally suits me but it also strategically suits me and it also protects that work ... We're supposed to be ... very, very humble about this and really be conscious that we're vessels. So, it's a challenge. And I'd say you've arrived at a moment where ... I'm thinking about legacy. So personally I've given so many talks, I give so many *sobhets* [discourses], I lead so many *zikrs*, but there's this kind of, well, when I'm not there in the room, I'm really aware that media or a book like yours or YouTube videos are a way that you reach out and you also, if you have some light to share and you've been offered something, whatever we all have you can reach so many people and you can reach people in perpetuity and so that's an offering and one shouldn't shy away from that either, you know? That can be like a false humility or stinginess but to be strategic in how you do that is really important. And then many of the great teachers who are here among us, they wouldn't want their names or their faces or their persons to be revealed at all, but actually they're the heart of the heart of the work.²⁹

In her reflections on her role and authority as a Muslim woman and a Sufi *shaykha*, Ghazi highlights some of the complex intersections within which her authority and life are delicately located. Some of these are particular to her personal social locations; others are informed more by her understanding of Sufi and spiritual work. For instance, her role as an academic (an educator of Arabic at the university) in a secular context and her active involvement as a Muslim in Sunni and Shia circles coexist with her leadership in universal Sufi groups, such as the Vancouver Rumi Society. She understands that her roles, especially as a woman, are not "mutually compatible" across these spaces; instead, they vary, which requires some deft strategic balance on her part. That is, she must negotiate how to exist and work in these diverse private and public domains that

constitute her life. All of this locates her at the nexus of various expressions of academia, Islam, Sufism, and spirituality. Given that she is a South Asian Muslim woman, these roles are further complicated by her many identities, which all hinge on one another and can undermine relationships she has formed and, more importantly, the work she does as a pastoral and spiritual leader for her various communities. So, much of her early work in these capacities was done quietly, sometimes in order to protect herself, and this led to the compartmentalization of her activities.

At the same time, Sufism, like most mystical and spiritual practices, is a tradition. As with most mystical and spiritual traditions in a multitude of cultural and social contexts, there is a sense that one should not openly and publicly speak about spiritual “work” or practice. For example, to even identify oneself as a Sufi may be understood as oxymoronic, for a Sufi is one who is *not*. In this vein, a Sufi is often encouraged to hide aspects of their practice – such as prayer, devotion, and healing – and leave them unspoken. Many Sufis remain concealed and nameless in the work they do; they may even choose not to identify themselves, and as Ghazi explains, some of these hidden masters are at the “heart of the heart” of Sufism. During the research for this project, many Sufis in various communities, even other women teachers, declined to partake in this project for this very reason. They were supportive of my work, but they told me that their spiritual work was not something they wanted to speak about publicly. Even so, they encouraged me to continue what I was doing, viewing it as a service to their tradition. Ghazi alluded to this earlier as she reflected on her legacy.

The first-generation Sufi leaders are growing old, and a new generation of them are leading the work in Canada. Ghazi contends that books such as this one, as well as social media, are valuable sites of institutional memory as well as a means to make teachings accessible to a broader and perhaps new audience. This sort of “memory work” is important especially when it comes to Sufi women’s stories and voices, and it is especially important today, at a time when many historical details about Sufi women have been lost or are being purged for theological and political reasons. Ghazi in our conversation was alert to all this and was strategically navigating these metaphysical, social, cultural, religious, and gendered norms, as many early Sufi women have done in the past.

What ties together all the traditions and spheres in which Ghazi exists is the path of Sufism. She is located in a universal Sufi path represented by the Vancouver Rumi Society and the lineages of Rifai Marufi and the Inayati Order, both Turkish and South Asian American-Canadian expressions of Sufism. Ghazi talked to me about what it meant to be a Sufi teacher who is a woman, focusing especially on what drew her to Turkish Sufism and on her own unique location as a South Asian Canadian Muslim woman:

GHAZI: I think that one of the reasons that Turkish Sufism has been very powerful for me is that there's just so much space for women's leadership, and women's voices and just women's embodiment and also I am very intellectual and I live in my head a lot and I think that actually I was meant to be in a *tariqa* where there is this kind of like wild dervish sort of antinomian energy out on the margins and where people are playing big drums and doing these fierce, you know ... *Ya Hayy Ya Hayy* [the Ever-living] kind of thing. That's because I come from this very refined Lucknow North Indian Mughal South Asian eldest daughter ... an academic ... my parents are both academics. My dad is like a *ghazal* poet, so there's all of this kind of refinement and elevation, but also, you know, we weren't supposed to dance ... This whole way of holding your body, that was very controlled as well, right ... So I think that being in this kind of path actually has released so many things for me. I mean it's allowed a certain kind of energy to flow and not just live in my cerebellum, or even not just in my heart ... but to spread that if you think about *chi* or something, through my body in allowing me to actually go out in the world, and be more expansive and expressive. I think that's been really, really powerful ... I know traditional Chishti South Asian Sufism, women, you have like stories of these amazing *bibis* and *hajjahs* and women who did incredible things or had spiritual experiences, but there's just not the same space, I think, you know, for leadership. I mean you have amazing women, you have Abida Parveen ... but some of it's just a function of the South Asian kind of class that I come from, or family ... But I don't know if part of what's going on with Turkey [is that] it sits at this boundary of what we call east and what we call west. And so I think as a Muslim who has grown up in North America and who is herself, always living between these boundaries, it also makes sense that Turkish Sufism is something that has really spoken to me. But you know these *shaykhas* that we have, these people like Cemalnur and, I mean, and her teacher Samiha Ayverdi was also a woman ... and she's just one. I think it's really powerful ... that it's just like there's a space for me to be the one who gives the *sohbets* and the teaching. There's a space for me to be the one who leads the *zikr*. I mean I've led prayer in my community for decades actually, but I just never talk about this because people won't understand, this is for the dervishes, this is for your dervish community, your sisters and brothers, you don't need to publicize this because look at what happened to Aisha, the wife of the prophet, if you know the story ... where she was falsely accused of being unfaithful ... the story where she lost her necklace and the story of the *ifk* [Quran]...

XAVIER: It's fascinating that that's the story that they bring up, yeah.

GHAZI: So that was the story, so just remember Aisha and the *ifk* and this is how people are. So, I talk about it now because first of all, I'm on the other side of fifty so you know I'm not vulnerable in the way that I was twenty years ago. And also society's moved a long way, like Muslim culture, and it's amazing, we've had amina wadud and now there's been studies of studies of studies of amina

wadud in that moment and all of that. You have the women's mosque but I was leading the *namaz* in our dervish community and giving *khutbah* in our dervish community. A long time, at that time thirty years ago there was no kind of South Asian space that I knew of or this kind of thing was possible, you know.³⁰

Ghazi draws from various Sufi ritual and historical contexts in her practice and leadership. Much of her work in the Sufi community in Vancouver draws from the Turkish tradition, for she has been initiated into the Rifai Marufi Sufi Order with the post-gendered Sufi framework utilized by Çatalkaya. Her experience of Turkish Sufism exposed her to *shaykhas* like Cemalnur Sargut (introduced earlier), who are active religious authorities in Turkey. Additionally, though she comes from South Asia, where women's presence has also been documented, even popularly with figures like Abida Parveen, the famous Qawwali singer, Ghazi's class and regional ancestry in north India likely further influenced how she experienced Sufism, which was in a sober or "refined" manner. Her encounter with Turkish Sufism, such as through the musical tradition of the Rifais and Mawlawis, in which the drum (*daf*) and the turning are prominent, was transformative for her new understanding of Sufism and her embodiment of it.

It is telling that in Ghazi's reflections on her own journey and on what has informed her particular orientation to South Asian and Turkish Sufism, she raises the story of Aisha, a wife of the Prophet Muhammad who was accused of adultery (known as the story of *ifk*), when she draws parallels to what she is doing as Sufi leader and the theme of shame evoked by this Quranic narrative. This highlights what Ghazi and other Muslim Sufi women face as figures of authority. Despite these societal challenges, she has been leading *namaz* and *zikr* for more than three decades in Vancouver and in various other dervish spaces, though until now she has been inclined to be more private about these aspects of her practice. Now, however, she has come to see that religiously and socially, North American Muslim society has changed, as a consequence of people like the social justice activist and retired professor amina wadud as well as the diversification of Muslim communities in Vancouver and Canada. Ghazi recounts that when she first came to North America from South Asia, American *masjids* did not allow for encounters with Sufism. She found that many of the *masjids* were far more influenced by the teachings of Abu Ala Maududi (d. 1979) or the Muslim Brotherhood, which were not the traditions to which she had been exposed during her upbringing.³¹ Women-only mosques are active in cities like Toronto and Los Angeles, and figures like wadud have led public mixed-gender prayers. The landscape of Muslim practice in relation to gender is slowly changing, and this has left Ghazi feeling less vulnerable in terms of speaking about her role in these movements. Nevertheless, she notes carefully that it is her age that gives her the most security at this moment in her

life: being a mother and “on the other side of fifty” has protected her – a sentiment that will be shared by Husain below.

The Sufism that Ghazi has come to understand and practise – that is, universal Sufism – reflects the Quran. Ghazi also has deep academic experience of Sufism that has been defined by some of the leading English-speaking academics in the United States, such as Michael Sells, Bruce Lawrence, miriam cooke, Vincent Cornell, and Rkia Cornell. During her graduate studies, she was part of a cohort of leading North American scholars of Islam, such as Siraj Scott Kugle, Omid Safi, Kecia Ali, Robert Rozehnal, and Rick Colby. She draws on these communities of scholars, often welcoming figures like Safi to Vancouver to lead in Sufi or spiritual retreats. Her encounter with her Sufi teacher Sherif Baba Çatalakaya has further solidified her understanding of the Quran, and in this, she does not separate her academic and religious studies. These collective realities inform her Sufism as well as her practice, leadership, and much more.

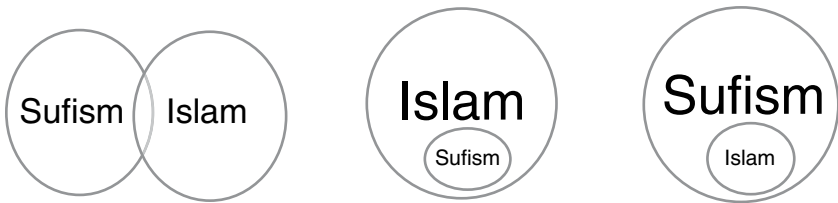
Ghazi added that the relationship between Sufism and Islam has long been complex, and even more so now that it is unfolding in the social and political milieu of Canada and America. During our conversation she raised the example of the Inayati Order and its South Asian lineage in the Chishti tradition:

I always say that the Inayati Chishtis, what they're doing, it's not just this is some New Age, New World invention that we can be deeply Sufi and not Muslims. This is something that has been present in the Chishti lineage for a long, long time. So it's authentic to that Chishti heritage, you know. If someone, you know, wants a historical precedent, right ... that's why that's different than the other types of Sufism, where they might insist, well, you become Muslim and then you could be somebody's *murid* or their disciple, you know? And then Bawa ... he shows up as a Hindu guru, right ... So I do think that one thing one has to be careful about in the universal Sufism is that the ways in which it can erase Islam and the ways in which people can be Sufi and still have quite explicit or unexamined Islamophobia ... and that's kind of a painful thing to experience. I think I have a lot of patience with that, because of my commitment to the path, you know? So in that realm, I'll have patience ... try to do the quiet work of releasing that without calling out culture or whatever ... And that's been an interesting thing even just to see Pir Zia because he's brought much more of the Islamic... in his own personal practice and life and family and all of that. That's much more present than it was for his father, right? So that's a direction he's gone in and how that's impacted their communities is interesting.³²

Being located as Sufi Muslim and leading a universal Sufi community that at times may be suspected of being “New Age,” Ghazi is sensitive about tracing back some of the universal tendencies noted in contemporary Sufi communities, such as the Inayati Order and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, to their

historical precedents and traditions. She draws from the traditions of Chishti Sufism in South Asia, where there is historical precedent for pluralism, especially in the religiously and culturally diverse landscape of India, where Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians have been drawn to Sufi teachers (Ernst and Lawrence 2022). She sees this as the legacy of Zia, who, unlike his father, practises Islam but also understands that the Inayati Order is embedded in and defined by the intersection of universalism and Islam. These elements of Sufism are complementary, not contradictory. These trends and tensions between the particularism of Sufism *in* Islam and the universalism of Sufism *through* Islam have been negotiated by various Sufi teachers, including, for example, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, who had a predominantly Tamil Hindu following in northern Sri Lanka but a religiously eclectic following in America (Xavier 2018). The legacies and teachings of these *shaykhs* continue to be contested and negotiated through the institutionalization of their charismatic authority, often after their death, as we see in the case of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. What Ghazi critically highlights is that at times, arguments over Sufism's universal tendency have been marred by explicit or implicit Islamophobia, which results in the desire or need to separate Sufism from Islam. This tendency was a consequence of European Orientalists' approaches to Sufism, which set one of the trajectories of universal Sufism in western Europe and North America (see [chapter 1](#)). In reflecting on these dynamics, especially in light of her own authority across these diverse spheres of Sufi expressions, Ghazi drew from a lesson given by Vincent Cornell, her former professor:

I think about it through one of my marvellous teachers Vincent Cornell, he used to use Venn diagrams all the time for everything and I remember [him] having us do this exercise of "Well, what's the relationship of Islam to Sufism?" Right, and you've got like a Venn diagram where there's Islam and Sufism and there's areas of overlap and there's areas of not overlap, right. And then there's the Venn diagram where you have Islam is the big circle and then Sufism is the circle inside it. It's like, well, Sufism is the heart of Islam. And then you've got like the big Sufism one and then Islam's in the middle and Islam's the heart of Sufism, right [see [figure 5.1](#)]. I mean, and you know, my response to this is yes and yes and yes, like these are all legitimate ways of exploring this really complex relationship, you know? We're not going to pin it down to one thing and so much of it actually you do have to look at lands of origin. So if you look at a place like Morocco, I mean I've spent time there and if you talk to Muslims there and I could say somebody could be a Sufi and not a Muslim ... They were just uncomprehending ... that's nothing they've seen. They're like, well, it goes back to Muhammad, like how do you have Sufism without Muhammad, just like *salawat* [praise of Muhammad] is so important. So for them it's incomprehensible, you know. And while you had rich Jewish communities ... in Morocco and you've had Christians in Morocco, and it's been a



5.1. Visual of Ghazi's Venn diagram as discussed in her interview. Left to right, Sufism and Islam as overlapping, Sufism as the heart of Islam, and Islam as the heart of Sufism.

pluralistic society in that way, up until very recently ... But then you go to India and it's totally different. All of the shrines are like Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, you know, the Sufi shrines all kinds of people from different faiths are there. I mean first of all, just talking about faith and religion itself, as a term, is so problematic, that itself is not probably a term that actually applies very well to Hinduism, you know, which never was an ism or to Islam.³³

For Ghazi, much of Sufism's development has been defined by the localized cultural contexts in which it has been institutionalized. Here, she draws our attention to two examples of Sufism in Morocco in comparison to Sufism in South Asia. In the former region, the idea of Sufism without Islam may seem impossible to many local Muslims, while in the latter they would not find it so jarring, for Sufism has existed beyond Islamic contexts, especially in devotional culture at shrines. As such, for Ghazi, as explained by her teacher Cornell's exercise, all of these aspects, Sufism and Islam's shared practices, Sufism as the heart of Islam, and Islam as the heart of Sufism, are all ways in which Sufism unfolds today, particularly in the west. Defining Sufism in one singular way is not productive, she explains. Still, in the west – in Canada, for example – Sufi communities that are framed as universal are often also understood as (or accused of being) “New Age,” as a means to signal to their lack of Islamic-ness (Xavier and Dickson 2020; Piraino 2020). It is precisely these narrow categorizations of Sufism that lead to approaching Islam restrictively and thus deem it unable to contain such diversity. Furthermore, the label of New Age, and the framing of a Sufi community as non-Islamic, are then tied to gender roles and praxis in a Sufi community, as was highlighted by Murat Coskun's experiences (see above). For Ghazi, her authority within and outside of Muslim, Sufi, and academic communities is informed by her understanding of Islam, Sufism (Turkish, South Asian, and North American), and her academic study of these traditions. These understandings of Islam and Sufism are mutually compatible. Another *shaykha* who who has found herself at similar crossroads is Ayeda Husain, a *shaykha* in the Inayati Order.

Ayeda Husain and the Inayati Order

After one of her biweekly Tuesday night *zikr* gatherings at her home outside of Toronto, Husain and I sat down for a conversation about her journey with Sufism and her experiences as a *shaykha*. She relayed that she began the journey to Sufism as a student in New York City in 1988. She was inspired to study and practise Sufism by her mother, who is a Sufi. She was initially connected with the Chishti-Sabri Sufi Order, a community she spent fifteen years with – a lineage shared by Ghazi. When she was ready to pursue Sufism more seriously, her teacher, who lived in Pakistan, passed away. Around that time, she learned about Vilayat Inayat Khan:

I had a dream in which an old, distinguished man with a white beard was telling me to come to the mountains. I wasn't sure what it meant. Then a friend of mine told me about a Sufi retreat in the Swiss Alps. When I Googled the name of the Sufi group, I saw the same man I had seen in my dream. So I said okay, let's go. I booked my ticket. It was non-refundable. A month before I was supposed to be there he passed away [2004]. I was quite flustered. The ticket was non-refundable. I figured I'll just take a book, I'll hang out alone in the Alps and read. That is when I realized he had a son and his son was to be my *murshid*. When I saw him I knew ... this, I recognized that purity which my teacher had, which I had not seen after him. So ... again that was fifteen years ago and I have not looked back.³⁴

Husain's dream led her to the Zenith Institute in the Swiss Alps, where Vilayat Khan hosted Sufi summer school seminars (some students in Vancouver spoke about these in [chapter 2](#).) Husain's attendance led her to meet his son Zia, who had been named the *pir* of the Sufi Order International. Since this encounter, Husain has been on the path of the Inayati Order. She has hosted *zikr* gatherings in Lahore and Dubai, where she has lived and worked for nearly eighteen years. Her relocation to Toronto led her to host *zikr* gatherings in her home, where on a biweekly basis ten to fifteen students gather to partake in the teachings and poems of Rumi, Hafiz, and Inayat Khan, as well as *zikr* and meditation as taught by Inayat, Vilayat, and Zia Inayat-Khan. These gatherings at times include live music and singing, and they are usually followed by some food, such as soup. Though many of Husain's students are South Asian Muslim women whom Husain has known over her time in Pakistan and the Gulf States, she has also attracted new students who may have been initiated into other Sufi communities, such as the Rifai Sufi Order and Rumi Canada. There is no gender segregation during *zikr* – everyone sits together in a circle while Husain leads. Within the Inayati Order, Husain is a *shaykha* and also a *cheraga* or a minister, which gives her authority to lead in the Inayati Order's ritual of Universal Worship. That ritual tradition was instituted by Inayat Khan

and has been central to the Inayati Order's praxis, as Amir O'Loughlin noted in [chapter 2](#):

As a *shaykha* I'm, well you know what a *shaykha* is, but as a *cheraga* you undertake a study for a couple of years in which you study the different religions of the world before you are authorized to conduct the Universal Worship service. It's something very unique to our order; in which you honour every religion of the world on the same altar. We have candles representing different religions and as we light them, we share readings from those scriptures and also present ... either ... a chant or a hymn from the tradition. So, it requires a fair amount of study. I am a *shaykha* because my *murshid* believes I have it in me to teach. I am a *cheraga* however because of intensive learning and research that have to be undertaken to gain a deeper understanding of the world's religions. It is a beautiful balance – as a *shaykha*, one is grounded in one's own tradition, teaching classic Sufism. As a *cheraga*, one is connected with all of the other traditions of the world. This is the philosophy of the whirling dervish, you know, you have one foot that does not move. It stays on the ground and the other foot moves. That means you are grounded in your own religion while being one with other religions of the world at the same time. In the Inayati order, this is something I can do, remain grounded in my own tradition while being open to all other traditions which other orders would not be, perhaps, open to.³⁵

Like Ghazi, Husain is located within a South Asian Muslim milieu and has come to the universal Sufi tradition of Inayat Khan and his successors. In her role as *cheraga* and in her practice of leading Universal Worship, she understands the practice as that of the dervish, one who is rooted in one's own tradition (in her case in Islam) and gleans from all traditions of the world. This approach defines her understanding of Sufism and its accessibility to those who seek the path. Though Husain spoke at length about the significance of being a *cheraga*, who has a unique role in the Inyati Order, she found that the title of *shaykha* was not as dramatically important as many make it seem:

XAVIER: Did you imagine that you would become a *shaykha* when you first began?

HUSAIN: Never.

XAVIER: On this journey?

HUSAIN: Never.

XAVIER: Okay.

HUSAIN: I've been an academic my whole life. I was writing about Sufism, about others, yet always in an academic context ... My teacher saw something and encouraged me to come out of the role of a student and become a teacher. I was sceptical initially because my style is casual and conversational and the excessive outer signs of piety that many eastern cultures place so much value on simply are

not a part of who I am. I was not sure I had the right personality. But I guess once again, my *murshid* saw something which I didn't ...

XAVIER: What does that mean to you to be a *shaykha*, especially in our contemporary contexts?

HUSAIN: You know, honestly, it's not a big deal; it just means you are a female teacher. I mean I was a teacher of literature ... I didn't have a name; they just called me Miss, whatever I was. So in Sufism I guess, it's so unique to have women teachers that you actually have your own name, but whatever another male can teach his *murid* [student] is what I'm teaching [my] *murid*. I don't think it makes me exotic or amazing or different, it just means that I'm a female teacher, that's all it means.³⁶

Husain does not see her role as *shaykha* as exemplary in any way. A *shaykh* is simply someone who can teach students on the path of Sufism. She was hesitant when Zia encouraged this path for her, especially since she was an academic, much like Ghazi, and had been a journalist for more than two decades, having lived in New York, Lahore, and Dubai. Even so, she accepted the task. Since then, Husain has been a member of the Inayatiyya Advisory Council and has held numerous Sufi retreats within the Inayati Order and in Tokyo (with Buddhist monks) and also as part of a UN international delegation of spiritual leaders. She is the author of *The Sufi Tarot: A 78-Card Deck and Guidebook* (2022).³⁷ Like Ghazi, Husain maintains both public and private forms of spiritual and authoritative practice. She is firmly rooted in the Inayati Order and during our conversation spoke less about her involvement in Muslim or Islamic communities.

Husain recounted that while living in Dubai and leading *zikr*, she encountered resistance from many who attended her gatherings. She found that the anxiety over her authority was often tied to her age or to the fact that she was not over seventy-five. It seems that for both Ghazi and Husain, age long worked against their early practice of their Sufi authority, and that for Ghazi today, age is now working to her advantage. The issue of age seems to be tied to sexuality and beauty, which, as Coskun relayed earlier, is a limitation for those on the path as well as a reflection of their spiritual state. Using age as a vector for accessing space or enacting authority is not a modern practice, but rather a theological variable employed in the past by jurists in *fiqh* (Islamic law). This has its parallels in debates over women's access to mosques, in which age has been applied as a barrier to access (Katz 2014). This negotiation of age is also encountered in hagiographies written by Muslim chroniclers: women who had reached old age were no longer marriageable and were sexually unavailable, and apparently this signalled that they were now wise and sagacious – and, of course, that they were no longer restricted by the social norms surrounding domestic responsibilities. Even today, for some Muslims who are concerned

about women's role as spiritual leaders, age seems to remain a mitigating factor in vetting women's Sufi authority.³⁸

Husain had a Sufi centre in Lahore, Pakistan, for six years and also held meetings in Dubai while living there. In Dubai, another criticism she encountered was tied to her ethnic and linguistic identity. The latter was less about her South Asian identity and more about her lack of fluency in Arabic. She is an Urdu-speaking Muslim, and this was often seen as insufficient in Dubai. At times, age, gender, and linguistic identity collectively was used to delegitimize her authority while she led in Dubai.³⁹ Since then she has moved to Toronto (in 2018), where she has been holding gatherings. These gatherings are a parallel to the meetings of the Sufi Order International that Hafiz holds in his home in Toronto ([chapter 2](#)). In her years leading Sufi gatherings in Dubai and other centres, she attracted a mix of men and women students who were drawn to her authority. In her Dubai gatherings, she sometimes attracted slightly more men. In Toronto, where she has fifty or so regular members, her gatherings tend to attract more women. She feels that this is probably because people attend her Tuesday *zikr* through word of mouth. Her home is not in downtown Toronto (like the Rifais and the Jerrahis, and like Sema Space in Montreal). As a result, her gatherings attract an older, more suburban middle-class demographic. Still, she has established connections with various Sufi communities in Toronto, regularly attending their *zikrs* and community events. So her suburban location means that those who attend her biweekly gatherings must make a concerted effort to participate:

You know, if I lived in downtown Toronto in a convenient location that people could walk to, things would be different. But I live [outside Toronto]. Coming to me is not easy so people are driving from Waterloo and Kitchener and some people from ... farther out ... more north, like North York, it can take them an hour and a half to get here. So I assume that they are serious. But there are also those who come for curiosity's sake, to see what's happening so they can go and tell people they have been to a *zikr* led by a *shaykha*, so on and so forth. It is the people who are regular and keep coming back that I believe are serious because it takes an effort to make it here.⁴⁰

In the end, then, Husain's understanding of Sufism is universal – that is, based on a universal approach to Islam, much like that of Ghazi:

Sufism is the heart of Islam as far as I'm concerned. The order which I belong to is universal ... There are no forced conversions as we believe that Sufism, which was formalized in Islam, has pre-existed in all formal religions. We believe that Adam was the first Sufi. The essence of Sufism, the sound of Hu [Him/Allah] which we believe existed [in] pre-eternity, has always been there. So to restrict it to Islam

would be to say that it didn't exist until fourteen hundred years ago which is not really accurate. It has always been there. I identify as being a Muslim and a Sufi and I believe that Sufism is at the heart of Islam. It's also the heart of every other world religion, it is the essence, it's the core of what every religion teaches which is your connection with the Divine. It is about understanding the essence of the message without getting obsessed with the form.⁴¹

Husain frames Sufism as a twofold process: it is located within the teachings of Islam, as the form, but also has an essence that transcends any religious traditions. Drawing from the teachings of Inayat, Vilayat, and Zia Inayat-Khan, the Inayati Order holds that the first Sufi was the prophet and patriarch Adam. Accordingly, as Ghazi expressed in [chapter 4](#), the "dispensation" of Islam as a specific religious and cultural form cannot contain the essence of Sufism as a spiritual tradition that has always existed. In this sense, Sufi teachings are the essence of all religious traditions. It is this universalism that is captured in the practice of the Universal Worship that was first implemented by Inayat Khan and that continues to be practised by the Inayati Order. That is the practice that Husain leads. When I asked her about her experience of Sufism, especially as she has led Sufi communities and spaces in South Asia and the Gulf States, she told me:

HUSAIN: Sufism is definitely attracting people ... Rumi has become a Facebook meme and events with the word Rumi or Sufi are often packed. However, not everyone is there because they want to commit to serious or long-term learning; many are there to be able to say that they went and saw whirling dervishes, or took part in a Sufi meditation, or did *zikr* without really wanting to get into it any deeper. How deep one goes, or not, that is up to the individual.

XAVIER: Right, so it doesn't really matter what your background is, it's kind of your intentionality, your commitment to this path?

HUSAIN: Yes, yes, I mean you can be an orthodox Muslim who has grown up in an ancient, historical city with Sufi roots and have no potential or interest in going deep into the teachings. Or you can be a Caucasian Canadian from a small town for whom Sufism is so new and yet take to it like you have been thirsting for it your whole life, without even knowing what it was called. Again, it varies from individual to individual.⁴²

In Husain's experience, then, the cultural container or identity of a Sufi practitioner cannot be a determining factor in ascertaining the legitimacy of Sufism, especially if one considers racial, cultural, or religious identity. She has had white Canadian students who have taken up the practice far more seriously than some Muslims who had been exposed to it growing up. In light of this, I asked whether she thought a unique form of Sufism was developing in Canada:

Sufism doesn't change, it is Sufism. It is the people, their receptivity and openness, that determines how it will be received. In Ontario, and Toronto especially, there is so much cultural diversity that even if you are coming from a different demographic, chances are you will have been exposed to enough, you know, eastern cultures to be open to it. This way it is not something you have never heard of or seen before ... When people live so close together in big cities, such close contact makes it harder to dehumanize each other. I feel very embraced as a female Sufi teacher in Canada. In fact I have been surprised at some of the events we've done, with four hundred, four hundred fifty people, with nothing but positive feedback.⁴³

Since her arrival in Toronto, Husain has been welcomed and accepted into the Sufi scene there. Moreover, those who study and meditate with her are from across the spectrum, both Muslim and non-Muslim, and have diverse racial identities. She does note the general trend toward the popularization of Rumi, especially in a city like Toronto, where attending a Rumi event or seeing a *sama* presentation earns one social media capital. Nevertheless, these events sometimes can serve as a catalyst for those who are truly interested in seeking out Sufism and finding a Sufi teacher. Many of my interlocutors noted the same (see [chapter 4](#)). For Husain, then, the individual seeker must take the first step, regardless of one's religious or gendered identity, especially with a community like the Inayati Order, which practises a universal understanding of Sufism. Based on her understanding and experiences, Husain feels that Sufism remains the same at its core, be it in Pakistan or in Toronto. In Canada, the students she has encountered are of diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. However, their dedication to the practice has not necessarily changed. An attraction to Sufism can be catalysed by Rumi's presence in the spiritual and popular landscape; those who are spiritually interested may seriously pursue Rumi and his teachings, leading them to teachers like Husain or Ghazi. *Samazens* like Farzad AttarJafari and Tawhida Tanya Evanson, and teachers like Murat Coskun, Seemi Ghazi, and Ayeda Husain, told me that exposure to Rumi, wherever it occurred, served as a starting point on the path of Sufism. According to these various Sufi leaders, Sufism does not discriminate against gender, religious, cultural, and/or racial identity. Some communities, like the Rifai, practise Islam; for other Sufi communities, like the Vancouver Rumi Society and Inayati Order, the practice of Islam is not a requirement. All of these variations have existed in historical and classical periods, and they continue to exist in Canada.

Conclusions

This final chapter mapped how gender norms around women are unfolding in Canada. The first half of the chapter described the patterns found in historical

and textual Sufi sources and how women were portrayed in early and medieval writings of Sufism. This discussion was not meant to be comprehensive in any way; rather, it was meant to engage Canadian trends, especially moments of continuities and fissures in Sufi gender norms. Narratives of Sufi women in classical periods were complex, primarily because they were authored by elite literate men, with the result that we learn more about these men's biases than we do about the Sufi women they were writing about. At the same time, the metaphysical elevation of the feminine, as an ideal spiritual state and perhaps the only true spiritual state that one must actualize on the Sufi path, provided women with some social, ritual, and religious capital for negotiating some societal gender norms within premodern Sufism and Islam. Figures like Ibn Arabi were known to have studied with *shaykhas*, while others, including Rumi, wrote about women in contradictory ways. Notwithstanding these variegated representations, Rumi's Mawlawi Order, which developed after his death, included women as substitute leaders and allowed for some ritual access for women, especially if they had familial connections with a Mawlawi Sufi teacher. In lived practice then, especially in studies of ethnographies on Sufi women's presence in South Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East, various scholars have documented the negotiated ways in which Sufi women have maintained their presence during ritual praxis, such as at Sufi shrines, or religious authority, which often depended on a familial patriarch who endorsed such authority. The point here is that these roles have always existed, albeit informed by various factors such as class, age, family status, culture, and social location. This is the backdrop against which I have considered the development of Sufism and gender dynamics in Canada.

In the development of Sufism in North America and western Europe, it was at the discretion of a Sufi teacher who arrived in the west that gender norms and authority were implemented. Some Sufi teachers reinforced gender segregation in ritual practice and only appointed men as leaders, while others broke with some of these established gender norms and cultivated egalitarian gender practices. We saw some of the legacies of these shifts in this chapter, particularly with the practice of *sama* as it was first introduced by Reshad Feild and solidified under the Mawlawi Sufi teacher of Konya, Suleyman Loras. His students, including Raqib Brian Burke, continued this legacy of teaching men and women to turn in *sama* together, which has been taken up by his daughter Mira Burke and further institutionalized in new Sufi communities formed by Shams al Haqq Farzad AttarJafari (Rumi Canada) and Tawhida Tanya Evanson (Sema Space). Evanson's experience as a Black woman *samazen* was insightful: she pointed out moments of exclusion and inclusion she experienced in Turkey and in Canada. Murat Coskun, the Sufi *shaykh* of the Rifai order in Toronto, was adamant about the gender-egalitarian practices in his community, for which he has attracted criticism, including from Sufi teachers in Turkey. He reminds his

detractors about classical metaphysical teachings in Sufism that the soul knows no gender or race. Sufi teachers like Coskun and Çatalkaya, and *samazens* like Evanson and AttarJafari, justify Sufi women's involvement in ritual practices by drawing from classical Sufism, especially metaphysical teachings about the essence of the soul. In evoking these Sufi teachings, they explain that gender-egalitarian rituals are ultimately a return to the essential traditions of Sufism and not necessarily a western (here, Canadian) innovation.

The second half of the chapter turned to the voices of two *shaykhas* I encountered over the course of my fieldwork on *sama* and Rumi-based communities and practices in Vancouver and Toronto. My documentation of their stories is an attempt to recentre the role of Sufi women (in Canada) and to further nuance how we think about gender, Sufism, and Islam in Canada. I quoted extensively from our conversations in this chapter in that hope that books like this one will serve as archives of women's stories in Sufism, in light of historical lacunae regarding such narratives. Also, the discussion has helped trace their particular experiences of gendered Sufi authority in light of their respective lineages, especially as South Asian Muslim women who lead universal Sufi communities. Ghazi and Husain pointed to the ways in which external variables such as age were a factor in the reception of their authority and leadership in various Sufi ritual and Muslim spaces. For instance, Ghazi highlighted that she found that age was used less often than before to challenge her authority. Like Husain, Ghazi has an international experience of Sufism, one that is defined by encounters with Sufism in Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan; both women continue to draw from those encounters as they teach Sufism in Canada. It is worthwhile to reflect on the ways in which these two prominent South Asian Sufi Muslim *shaykhas* in Canada are involved in actively cultivating Sufi communities and institutions with significant ties to the Inayati Order and the Rumi Society while drawing from South Asian and Turkish (Rifai Marufi for Ghazi) traditions of Sufism. Their communities include Muslim and non-Muslim seekers and Sufis alike. Both of them locate their authority in their Islamic South Asian roots while working within dynamic spaces that attract various members to their circles. Ghazi's authority is malleable, in that it exists both in Muslim and academic spaces and in inter- and intra-religious and spiritual communities, as well as in explicitly Sufi spheres, where she leads in prayers (*namaz*), *zikr*, and songs and gives discourses or *sohbets*. Husain's authority is more firmly located in the Inayati Order. They both lead universal Sufi communities and find that the essential teachings relayed in these communities are the crux of Islam.

One reality that has emerged throughout this chapter's discussion is that women's location in ritual practice and in authoritative positions is often used as a means to declare whether a Sufi community is Muslim or not, and whether its version of Sufism is real or not (i.e., New Age). Historically, discussions

around the practice of Sufism have encountered this dilemma: women's prominence at Sufi shrines, for instance, often resulted in theologians or jurists condemning Sufi shrines as adulterated and, it follows, as heretical or innovative (*bida*). Notably, Ghazi and Husain both locate their Sufi communities as universal, as informed by their relationship with Islam and the Quran. As such, they have had to delicately balance their authority. Coskun's Rifai Sufi community is not framed as a universal order, though it is inclusive. It is a Muslim Sufi order that maintains gender-egalitarian practices. Earlier, he explained that his decision to uphold gender-egalitarian practices would have been better received if his group had indeed been a New Age one. Here, then, I return to the term evoked earlier by Evanson: "post-gender," which is conceptually a productive expression to think through and with. Metaphysically (and technically), Sufi teachings can allow for post-gendered expressions of Sufism, but Sufism, Canadian or not, is not always post-gendered in embodied realities, for it is coloured by social, cultural, religious, and political elements. There are Sufi communities that sustain gender-equal praxis, and others, like the Inayati Order and the Rifai Marufi community, that allow women leadership authority; these latter communities might be framed as post-gender. However, Sufi communities that are framed as post-gender are further scrutinized because their post-gendered practices are deemed part of New Age (or western) trends and thus non-Islamic. Yet as captured in the voices above, for many Sufi leaders and practitioners, post-gendered Sufism, be it in terms of ritual practice or of gendered authority, is a return to the essence of Sufism as found in metaphysical teachings of Rumi and other Sufi masters. According to their understanding, this form of gender-inclusive Sufism is inherently Islamic. From their perspective, these gender dynamics are neither a western innovation nor a result of popular spirituality. Nevertheless, many of my interlocutors in Canada have had to navigate these realities between notions of traditional Islamic and New Age (universal) frameworks in their praxis.

- 42 For more details about the screening of *Wajd: Songs of Separation* (2018) at the Aga Khan Museum, visit <https://agakhanmuseum.org/programs/wajd-songs-of-separation-with-performance-by-rumi-canada>.
- 43 Interview with author, 15 December 2019, Toronto.
- 44 For more on the charity Canadian Arabic Orchestra, visit <https://canadianarabicorchestra.ca/home>.
- 45 Interview with author, 15 December 2019, Toronto.
- 46 For more about Niyaz, visit <https://www.niyazmusic.com>.
- 47 Interview with author via Skype, 17 May 2019, Kingston and Montreal.
- 48 Interview with author via Skype, 17 May 2019, Kingston and Montreal.
- 49 Interview with author, 17 May 2022, Vancouver.
- 50 More about the Meditation Center can be found on its website, <https://www.sufimeditationcenter.com>. The community has a robust online and social media presence that includes Facebook and YouTube and their homepage. It livestreams its events on Facebook.
- 51 Interview with author, 18 February 2020, Vancouver.
- 52 For some historical context regarding the Naqshbandi, specifically in the Ottoman context, see Dina Le Gall's *A Culture of Sufism: Naqshbandis in the Ottoman World* (2005).
- 53 Interview with author, 18 February 2020, Vancouver.
- 54 Interview with author, 18 February 2020, Vancouver.
- 55 Interview with author, 18 February 2020, Vancouver.
- 56 You can learn more about Rumi restaurant at <https://www.restaurantrumi.com/?lang=en>. For more on the Naqshbandi-Haqqani in Montreal, see Mercier-Dalphoné 2021.
- 57 Various scholars, such as Vaziri (2015), have underscored Rumi's humanism, perennialism, Islamic-ness, and much more.
- 58 Interview with author, 15 December 2019, Toronto.
- 59 Interview with author, December 2018, Toronto.
- 60 Interview with author, 20 February 2020, Vancouver.
- 61 Interview with author, 20 February 2020, Vancouver.
- 62 Interview with author, 20 February 2020, Vancouver.
- 63 Interview with author, 20 February 2020, Vancouver.
- 64 Interview with author, 19 February 2020, Vancouver.
- 65 Interview with author, 19 February 2020, Vancouver.

5 Gender Dynamics in Sufi Rituals, Praxis, and Authority

- 1 Cornell (2019) points to parallels between Rabia and Plato's Diotima as another possible example of the influence of Neo-Platonism on the development of Sufism, especially as the "Lover" (188–96).

- 2 For more about the tradition that developed around Fatima, and its linkages to Maryam, see Alyssa Gabbay, *Gender and Succession in Medieval and Early Modern Islam: Bilateral Descent and the Legacy of Fatima* (2020) by.
- 3 The Arabic language, which is gendered, also informed these metaphysical approaches. As Schimmel (1992) explains, “for the Muslims this view – which stands in stark contrast to the Prophet’s own words and practice – was facilitated by the fact that Arabic word *nafs*, which was usually understood as the *nafs ammāra*, “the soul inciting evil” (Sura 12/53), is grammatically feminine and thus could be associated with any number of images and metaphors. This negative attitude was strengthened by another grammatically feminine word, *dunyā*, ‘this world,’ ‘the world of matter’ (as contrasted with *al-ākhirā*, the “other world”). Representations of the material world as dangerous woman occur in Islamic literature as they do in Christian texts as well as in Manichaean and gnostic writings” (96–7).
- 4 Many contemporary Sufi communities continue to evoke expressions of gender, especially of the feminine, through cosmological orientations. An example is the Maryamiyya’s focus on Mary, which developed from the mystical vision of the Virgin Mary by Frithjof Schuon (d. 1998) in 1965. This experience altered the course of his Alawiyya branch and led to the group being renamed the Maryamiyya (see Sedgwick 2004; 2016). However, despite taking a metaphysical approach to gender that privileges the feminine, which in turn influences the theological and philosophical discourse of the movement, the social and institutional structures of some Traditionalist-oriented Sufi movements, like the Maryamiyya, still tend to reinforce a gender hierarchy, especially of a patriarchal nature.
- 5 *Mukhannath*, which Schimmel (1992) translates as “hermaphrodite,” is another reoccurring figure in the poetry of Rumi. In Rumi’s tales, this figure is “a model of those unreliable, hypocritical ones who belong neither to this world nor to the other, and he cannot help telling of such a person who met a shepherd and then complained that the buck in his herd had given him a funny look and laughed at him” (103).
- 6 There are few Sufi sources written by women. One is by the fifteenth-century Damascene Aishah al-Bauniyyah and is titled *The Principles of Sufism*, which has been translated by Emil Homerin (2016). This is a Sufi manual on comportment and practice.
- 7 Catherina Raudvere (2002) also captures how Sufi women had to negotiate various public and private spaces in contemporary Istanbul during ritual participation, such as during *zikr*.
- 8 There is a rich corpus of studies on Sufi shrines and women’s devotion in South Asia. Examples include Bellamy (2012), Fluekiger (2006), Pemberton (2004), Anand Vivek Taneja, *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi* (2017), and Omar Kasmani, *Queer Companions: Religion, Public Intimacy, and Sainthood Affects in Pakistan* (2022).

- 9 Abbas (2002) explores Sufi shrines, such as to Bulleh Shah in Kasur, Bibi Pak Daman, Data Ganj Bakhsh Hujwiri, Shah Hussain, and Mian Mir in Lahore, Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and Shah Abdul Latif in Sind, and Bahauddin Zakariya and Rukunuddin Shah Alam in Multan. At these various shrines, Abbas found women leading rituals such as *sama*. She highlights how the feminine trope or voice of Sufi women has been maintained in poetic traditions that are sung, such as Qawwali music.
- 10 For more on these figures, see “Gendering Sufism” in Sharify-Funk et al. (2017).
- 11 For an excellent study of women’s mosques, please see Jacqueline H. Fewkes, *Locating Maldivian Women’s Mosques in Global Discourses* (2019).
- 12 For more on this activism and wadud’s legacy, see Kecia Ali, Juliane Hammer, and Laury Silver, eds., *A Jihad for Justice: Honoring the Work and Life of Amina Wadud* (2012).
- 13 For more perspectives on immigrant Muslim experiences, see Parin Dossa, *Racialized Bodies, Disabling Worlds: Storied Lives of Immigrant Muslim Women* (2009).
- 14 Interview with author, 18 February 2020, Vancouver.
- 15 Sufi women have a varying presence in the Persian tradition of Sufism, an important thread that has not been properly captured by my study due to this book’s limited scope. I hope that future scholarship on Sufism in Canada will consider this important dimension. Javad Nurbakhsh, the Sufi *shaykh* of the Nimatullahi Order, which has a branch in Toronto, has published a hagiography of Sufi women titled *Sufi Women* (1983), which is available in English.
- 16 Interview with author, 3 January 2018, Toronto.
- 17 Interview with author, 3 January 2018, Toronto.
- 18 Visit Cemalnur Sargut, <http://cemalnur.org/contents/detail/his-understanding-of-woman/664>.
- 19 Visit Cemalnur Sargut, <http://cemalnur.org/contents/detail/his-understanding-of-woman/664>.
- 20 Cemalnur’s global presence can be seen in her Twitter following, which has almost 100,000 followers. She has also established Islamic studies academic positions, named after Kenan Rifai, at the University of North Carolina and Kyoto University. Visit her website <http://cemalnur.org/contents/detail/cemalnur-sargut-kimdir/12>. Samiha Ayverdi, a Turkish writer and Sufi, succeeded Kenan Rifai. For more on Cemalnur, please see Sharify-Funk et al. (2017).
- 21 For more on Cemalnur Sargut’s teachings in English, see Thaver (2017). See also Feyza Burak-Adli, “Trajectories of Modern Sufism: An Ethnohistorical Study of the Rifai Order and Social Change in Turkey” (PhD diss., Boston University, 2020).
- 22 Muzaffer Ozak al-Jerrahi has published many books in English for a western audience, such as *Blessed Virgin Mary* (1991), which captures again a classical trend of the veneration of the creative feminine principle in the figure of Mary.
- 23 Interview with author, 3 January 2018, Toronto.
- 24 Interview with author, 15 December 2019, Toronto.

- 25 Interview with author via Skype, 17 May 2019, Kingston and Montreal.
- 26 This comment was relayed to me during my conversation with Cem Aydogdu, the translator and *murid* of Sherif Baba Çatalkaya, on 11 August 2020.
- 27 There are other Sufi women leaders in Canada; however, for this book I have looked specifically at communities that are broadly affiliated with Rumi and his legacy. So I have had to exclude other voices. Again, I hope future scholars on Sufism in Canada will develop these threads further. For instance, the Canadian branch of the Azeemia Spiritual and Healing Center Canada, whose current leader is Khwaja Shamsuddin Azeemi, regularly meets in Mississauga in the Greater Toronto Region. That centre organizes an annual Adam's Day ("Unity in Diversity") to honour the origins of humanity in the patriarch. That day, initiated by Khawja Shamsuddin Azeemi, is celebrated in America, the United Kingdom, and Canada. The same event celebrates the anniversary of the order's patron saint Qalandar Baba Auliya, who founded the *silsila-e-azeemia* in Karachi, Pakistan. The community has centres across Europe, the UK, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and Canada. It is oriented toward Islam and Sufism but also utilizes colour therapy, meditation (*muraqba* or mental concentration), and parapsychology while stressing scientific thought. Its website streams events live and provides access to audio and video archives; also, *duas* can be requested online. The community also commemorates a *mehfil e meelad* for the Prophet Muhammad and an *urs* for its *shaykh*, Qalandar Baba Auliya. The Mississauga branch is led by a Pakistani woman, and much of the organizing of the events involves women and men students. This *shaykha* holds regular gatherings in her home and has also led *zikr* and prayers in public gatherings, such as during Adam's Day.
- 28 Her recitations are included in Michael Sells's *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (1999) as well as the PBS documentary *Islam, Empire of Faith* (2000).
- 29 Interview with author, 20 February 2020, Vancouver.
- 30 Interview with author, 20 February 2020, Vancouver.
- 31 Maududi founded Jamaat-e Islami, a religio-political party in Pakistan. He was a scholar, activist, journalist, and jurist. He died in Buffalo, New York. The Muslim Brotherhood, an anti-colonial social justice movement founded in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna (d. 1949), has become one of the world's most influential Islamist political movements.
- 32 Interview with author, 20 February 2020, Vancouver.
- 33 Interview with the author, 20 February 2020, Vancouver.
- 34 Interview with author, 18 December 2018, Oakville.
- 35 Interview with author, 18 December 2018, Oakville.
- 36 Interview with author, 18 December 2018, Oakville.
- 37 A link to the tarot cards is <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/712682/the-sufi-tarot-by-ayeda-husain>.
- 38 For more, see Katz (2014).
- 39 Interview with author, 18 December 2018, Oakville.

- 40 Interview with author, 18 December 2018, Oakville.
- 41 Interview with author, 18 December 2018, Oakville.
- 42 Interview with author, 18 December 2018, Oakville.
- 43 Interview with author, 18 December 2018, Oakville.

Epilogue

- 1 These individuals have been members of the movement for decades (and thus when labelling this group, a white Sufi community, it erases their presence).
- 2 See the special issue of *Journal of Islamic Studies* on “Engaged Sufism” edited by Kugle and Shaikh; see also Said, Funk, et al. (2001). Sri Lanka was plagued by civil war for nearly three decades, and this informed Bawa’s approach to non-violence. During his ministry in northern Sri Lanka, he often tried to dissuade his Tamil students from engaging in violence. He arrived in Philadelphia at a time when race-based Muslim organizations like the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Moorish Science Temple (MST) were forming in America. During his initial ministry there, he attracted many African American students from these organizations. Bawa was himself a racialized man, and this resonated with racialized Americans.
- 3 Rozehnal (2019) in his study of the Inayati Order and its cyber-presence highlights some of the ways in which Zia Inayat-Khan and his community’s online presence include social justice and activism work.
- 4 <https://www.jerrahi.ca/relief-work>.
- 5 For pictures and more details, visit <http://iqra.ca/2014/bridges-beyond-faith-an-event-dedicated-to-peace>.
- 6 <https://www.jerrahi.ca/gallery>.
- 7 See other such events on their homepage, <https://www.jerrahi.ca/events>.
- 8 For a documentary on the life and activism of El-Farouk Khaki, visit https://vimeo.com/395012143?fbclid=IwAR2HKopRibk4Gym1xifzQIQnt3vcuMAsPnbDBvF_fOaCP8IPNp36A6MgRy0.
- 9 Interview with author, 20 February 2020, Vancouver.
- 10 Whiteness is also not a stable category and never has been. For more on this discussion, see Neda Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race*.
- 11 Interview with author via Skype, 17 May 2019, Kingston and Montreal.
- 12 Interview with author via Skype, 17 May 2019, Kingston and Montreal.

The Dervishes of the North

*Rumi, Whirling, and the Making
of Sufism in Canada*

MERIN SHOBHANA XAVIER

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