Osman, Mujahid

Toward an Intersectional Islamic Ethic : Reading the Engaged Scholarship of Sa'diyya Shaikh

In:

Nelly Mwale, Rosinah Mmannana Gabaitse, Fundiswa Kobo and Dorothy Tembo (Eds.), Nehanda : Women's Theologies of Liberation in Southern Africa (Circle Jubilee Volume 3), Bamberg : University of Bamberg Press, S. 289-305. DOI: 10.20378/irb-95198

Beitrag im Sammelwerk - Verlagsversion

DOI des Beitrags: 10.20378/irb-96505

Datum der Veröffentlichung: 18.07.2024

16 | Toward an Intersectional Islamic Ethic: Reading the Engaged Scholarship of Sa'diyya Shaikh

Mujahid ***Osman***

Abstract

In her incisive reading of Islamic and feminist traditions, South African scholar Saʾdiyya Shaikh (2013) maps out the challenge of engaged intersectional scholarship constructing an analytic called "multiple critique." Deploying a feminist hermeneutical approach of rereading, reconceiving, and reconstructing (O'Conner 1989), Shaikh challenges and reconfigures the boundaries of tradition. Her analytical and methodological approach is informed by three intersectional registers of interventing, disrupting rapacious normative configurations of social power, and suggesting capacious modes of being human. This chapter examines three interconnected themes in her engaged scholarship – religious anthropology, sociality, and the Divine-human relationship in Islam – to show how an intersectional approach develops discourses of compassionate succour for marginal communities by exposing the inner workings of dominant structures of power and cultivating alternative modes of being human.

Keywords: Islamic Feminism, Saʾdiyya Shaikh, Multiple Critique, Religious Anthropology, Sociality, Divine-human Relationship

Introduction

I first met Professor Saʾdiyya Shaikh when I was an undergraduate student at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 2013. We both attended the historic Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town and for this Good Friday service, she delivered the lecture. In the wake of the country's increasing instances of gender-based violence, Shaikh challenges the socio-cultural practices and norms that legitimate cases of physical violence. She argued for an ethics based on the liberative anthropological

potential to comport in the "best of forms" above the latency to be "lowest of the low" as observed in the Qurʾān (95:4-6). In her talk, she contended that the cultivation of capacious modes of being human is necessary if we want to radically change the nature of gender-based violence in society. By using a framing of compassion, Shaikh called for a restorative justice that not only responds to the survivors, but also addresses the "root causes." This service was a clarion call for the liberative potential of religion in the struggle for social justice. I remember going up to Prof. Shaikh (in deep admiration) to thank her for her witness, telling her I would take her popular course, Religion, Gender, and Sexuality in my second year at UCT. After learning about my own tradition in that course, I gained insight into the broader struggle for gender justice in religious traditions, spaces, and communities. Prof. Shaikh advised my Honors research thesis project on queer Muslims in Cape Town and encouraged my pursuit of the ethical in the Study of Religion and in the process of being human. In this chapter, I reflect lovingly on Shaikh's treasure trove of scholarship examining the interconnected themes of religious anthropology, sociality, and the Divine-human relationship in Islam. Through a close inter-textual mode of reading, I review her published work in conversation with broader scholarship in Islamic studies, gender studies, and liberation theology to place her contributions in broader tradition of engaged scholarship.

A South African feminist scholar of Islam, Shaikh frames religion in her personal interactions with parents and political experiences of the anti-apartheid struggle for liberation from racial capitalism. As a young adult living under normative violence, Shaikh found ethical inspiration in the spiritual resources of the Islamic tradition to resist structures of domination. Merging her commitment to Islam and her anti-apartheid activism, Shaikh presented a form of Islamic liberation theology refracting liberation and praxis through the struggle for gender justice, known as the "gender jihad" (Shaikh, 2021:120). Shaikh's gendered theology of liberation connects the vertical (direct relationship with the Divine) and the horizontal (service to creation) as different points of entry into the longer journey to find the face of the God. Finding solidarity with Christian feminists in a local chapter of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Cape Town, Shaikh draws on her engaged relationship to the normative legacy of Islamic tradition reframing notions of self/other by foregrounding the God-human relationship as the point of orientation (Shaikh, 2021:122).

Ethically committed to an "uncompromising resistance to injustice" and an "intersectional vigilance," her praxis as a teacher, her activism in social justice struggles, and her scholarship as an academic show how experience as an analytical concept can be a central site of ethical meaning-making and knowledge production in Islam. To engage this process, Shaikh recommends an intersectional framework called a "multiple critique" (Shaikh, 2013:23). This approach is informed by three registers of intervention. First, Shaikh argues that this project engages in a structural critique of problematic elements within the Islamic tradition, possibly taking the form of an interrogation of androcentrism embedded within the hegemonic rendering of tradition. Second, Shaikh proposes a disruption of "the onslaught of empire in its many faces" by exposing its underlying coloniality, or spirit of colonialism, through a vigilance of neocolonial and imperial forms of feminism and later queerness (Shaikh, 2013:24). In this discursive jihad, Shaikh challenges the way Muslims are figured within the imagination of Global North. Third, an intersectional project requires a new form of theologizing emerging from an inclusive religious anthropology. By recovering and reconceiving humanizing aspects of the Muslim tradition, an intersectional project can uphold the human dignity (*karāmat al-insān*) of marginalized peoples and communities by deploying spiritual nourishment in the search for liberation (Shaikh, 2013:24). Through this tripartite approach, Shaikh develops an intersectional praxis attending to the overlapping ways in which power is produced, embodied, and reorganized. Shaikh's framework goes beyond secular feminist critique. It also proposes the possibility of liberation inspired by the worldview of Islam. Through this analytical framework, I analyze Shaikh's contributions to a spiritual politics of social justice.

This chapter is divided into three sections. One, I examine how Shaikh challenges androcentric religious anthropology, or male-dominated conceptions of the human from a religious or theological perspective through her analysis of the Qurʾānic (2:30) concept of *khilāfa,* translated as trusteeship, vicegerency, or moral agency (Shaikh, 2003). As theological anthropology informs the tradition of scriptural commentary, I then analyze Shaikh's (2007) "tafsir of praxis," as another manifestation of her commitment to uprooting androcentrism and challenging patriarchal Islam. In the second section, I examine debates around the practice of veiling and the politics of queerness. As the figure of the Muslim woman (and later the queer Muslim) is engulfed by multiple contesting historical legacies and contemporary patters of power (Mohanty, 2003; Puar, 2007),

Shaikh carefully navigates the assaults of empire by exposing how Islamo-racism figures the political terrain of Northern development and intervention. While this section exposes the insidious workings of structural and cultural violence, it also frames Muslim intervention and contours the path of transformation. Third, through examining her engagement with the *Shaykh al-Akbar* (lit. the Greatest Shaykh, an honorific title), Muḥyī ad-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240), I reflect on Shaikh's reading of mystical theology and its liberative potential for society (2012). Ibn ʿArabī was an Andalusian premodern Muslim thinker, jurist, and mystic who inspired a theological doctrine reflecting the radical oneness of creation called the Oneness of Being or *Wa dat al-Wujūd*. Framed by the primary unity of God, called *taw īd*, Shaikh's creative reconfiguration of Ibn ʿArabī's spiritual, theological, philosophical, and ethical treaties, explores the contours of an inclusive religious anthropology and its implications for a socially just and spiritually enriching Muslim law and ethics.

Challenging Islamic Patriarchy

Early Islamic feminist scholarly interventions engaged with the primary sources of Islamic guidance, the Qurʾān (Wadud, 1992; Barlas 2002) and *Ḥadīth* (Mernissi, 1991). Later feminist engagements undertook to critique and transform Muslim legal system (Ali 2006; Mir-Hosseni, 2006; Seedat, 2021), philosophical virtue ethics (Ayubi, 2019), and mysticism (Shaikh, 2012). Shaikh contends for a structural-based critique of patriarchy, moving from a rights-based discourse to the development a systematic examination of the deeply endemic nature of male-power. While much of earlier feminist interventions strategically attended to the lack of rights for Muslim women, Shaikh's intervention attends to the constructed nature of the philosophical, legal, or spiritual tradition as a sociohistorical product of an elite group of men called the *ʿulamāʾ* (Shaikh, 2015:113). She therefore proposes to interrogate the underlying anthropology of tradition subverting various hierarchies of power constructing human subjects. By attending to the "metaphysical sensibilities that foreground the God–human relationship" above contemporary political sensibilities or cultural aesthetics, she grounds her intervention in the deep spiritual resources of tradition as opposed to so-called secular ethical ideals (Shaikh, 2015:114).

Through the lens of "religious anthropology," Shaikh argues we can better conceive of the role of the human person in the worldview of Islam

(Shaikh, 2012:6-7). On the one hand, religious anthropology represents how the human subject relates to God. On the other, it also explains the ontological purpose of the human person and its role in the socio-political mapping of the cosmos. While some religious anthropologies propose an egalitarian ideal, most are premised on a binary sex system that holds the masculine as primary term and the non-masculine as a "deviant," secondary term. Presenting a range of ethical possibilities within Islamic feminist discourses, Shaikh explains that the archetypal human, or the *khalīfa* of God on the earth (Q 2:30), signifies an intersectional or liminal figure (Shaikh 2022, 492). Linking the materiality of this world with the ephemerality of the hereafter, the *khalīfa,* or the moral agent or vicegerent, is meant to be the symbolic manager of God on the earth attempting to establish relations of compassionate justice. Guided by a primordial nature (*fiṭra),* the human as agent is capable of "discernment" guiding social practice (Shaikh, 2003a:107). Linking the *fiṭra* to the mystical ensoulment described in Qurʾān (15:29), Shaikh embeds religious anthropology with the capacity to discern an ethical path forward as agents of God (Shaikh, 2003a:107).

While religious anthropology informs sociality, it is often legitimated by readings of scripture. The Islamic tradition of premodern Qurʾānic commentary is rich with literary merit, but often limited by patriarchal and classed biases. Investigating this tradition, Shaikh exposes the workings of androcentric power. Viewing the Qurʾān as an "ocean without a shore," she explores the multivocality of the text, analyzing the interconnections of authority, violence, and gender by studying Q 4:34:

> Men are the protectors and maintainers [*qawāmūn*] of women, because God has preferred some of them over the other, and because they spend from their wealth. So, the pious women [*sāli ātٍ*] are devoutly obedient, guarding the unseen, from that which God commands them to protect. As for those women who you fear ill-conduct and disloyalty [*nushūz*]: advise them, refuse to share beds, and [lastly] beat them [*waḍribu hunna*]. And if they obey you, do not seek against them a way. For God is High, Great.

Explaining the embodied social world informing this Qurʾānic citation, Shaikh suggests that this verse, and its rich legacy of interpretation, is informed by a socio-cultural patriarchy that establishes men as the "protectors and maintainers of women" because of supposed intellectual and moral superiority and duty to economically maintain the household (Shaikh, 1997:59). The normative woman (*sāli a*) is juxtaposed with the

disobedient women who performs disloyality and immorality through *nushūz*. For this category of woman there is a three-step remediation process of discipline: verbal admonishment, separation within the martial bed, and finally physical punishment. While this normative legacy has religiously inspired marital violence, it has also been robustly contested by feminist scholars and activists (Mir-Hosseini, Al-Sharmani and Rumminger, 2015*)*.

In her contestation with tradition, Shaikh proposes a "tafsir of praxis," whereby the process of "everyday ethical truth-making in the lives of ordinary Muslim women" is especially attentive to the experiences of survivors of gender-based violence (Mahomed and Shaikh, 2018:126). Inspired by her research interlocutors, Shaikh theologically resists marriages based on an asymmetrical power relation and rather follows the Qurʾān, calling for marriages based on mutual partnership, love (*mawadda*), and compassion or *ra ma* (Q 4:1). Reflecting on her research findings, Shaikh contends that for these abused women "God is the antithesis of violence" (Shaikh, 2007:79). By juxtaposing the narratives of Muslim women's engagement with Islamic ethical discourses together with their lived experience of violence, Shaikh's *"tafsīr* of praxis" suggests that the hermeneutical circle of interpretation needs to be reassessed, challenging patriarchal interpretations and reimagining egalitarian alternatives (Shaikh, 2007:74). Moving away from an androcentric form of disembodied textual interpretation, Shaikh proposes an embodied *tafsīr* that aspires to read the moral arc of the Qurʾān in dialogue with her witness to marital violence. As a contention with the inherited male-dominated clerical tradition, Shaikh expands the vocality of the Qurʾān, grounding it in the "women's full humanity in religious terms (Shaikh, 2007:89). By reclaiming tradition, Shaikh is reframing scriptural praxis away from androcentric clerical elites to marginalized social classes like Muslim women or gender minorities. A practical illustration of this ethical commitment is in Shaikh's call for the establishment of ethical marriage contracts to protect both partners in an Islamic marriage as a means of finding justice in this world (Shaikh, 2022b).

In her resistance, Shaikh subverts androcentric religious anthropologies by challenging patriarchal scripts and expanding the notion of human personhood. Through this expansion, she challenges scriptural hermeneutics that posit a patriarchal and exclusive anthropology. She proposes an ethics of dignity that frames human potential as an egalitarian ideal for all human beings regardless of the sexism of the *ʿulamāʾ*. Despite

their hegemony on the Muslim tradition, marginalized Muslims are wrestling power away from the male dominated heteronormative core. In this way they are embracing the text not as a "sovereign" entity, but rather in dialogue with the mundane of the everyday (Moosa, 2003:123). As Shaikh's interventions within Islamic ethics demonstrates, Muslims can reconfigure religious anthropology and present the possibility of an egalitarian future. As Islamic patriarchy diminishes the humanity of women, gender minorities, sexual deviants, and normative men, it is also a part of a larger socio-political mapping informing the experience of Islam in the contemporary world. In the next section of this essay, I examine the onslaughts of empire as part of this broader mapping shaping, modifying, and responding to Islam and the practices of Muslims.

Subverting Colonial Feminism

The legacies of colonialism have impacted many communities across the Global South. As former colonized nations from the Americas, Asia, and Africa grapple with their brutal histories of colonial violence, they also engage to subvert new forms of colonial control. Mahmood Mamdani (2020) contends that European political modernity translated into forms of political and economic domination, shaping the relations of power. While most of the formal European colonial powers have reduced their political influence, the spirit of colonialism still haunts contemporary postcolonial nations (Mamdani, 2020). Called the ghost of coloniality, this apparition influences the relations of power and shapes discourses and practices of domination, curtailing the full expression of former colonial subjects. Santiago Slabodsky explains that coloniality is based on "the patterns of domination that were developed during colonial times and that continue to reproduce themselves beyond formal colonialism" (2017:31). While the bodies of Muslim women were exoticized and essentialized during the colonial period (Ahmed, 1992), in the current period, the lives and bodies of Muslim women (and sexual minorities) are particularly organized through various mechanisms of statecraft that curtail their full expression and agency (Shaikh, 2003:150). Because of these forces of political economy, Shaikh writes:

> the current debates on feminism, gender, and women's rights in Islam are ideologically charged, since they are embedded in a history of larger civilizational polemics between the Islamic world and the West. Gender

> discourses in contemporary Islam are prefigured by the history of a political conflict between Islam and Christianity, the European colonial encounters in different parts of the Muslim world, and the nationalist responses by colonized peoples. The processes of globalization, in tandem with neo-colonial configurations of power, currently pervade not only the concrete economic and sociopolitical spheres of most parts of the world but also the areas of knowledge production (2003:49).

In other words, through the histories of colonial domination, the figure of the Muslim woman has partly been shaped by a normative discursive and political context that reflects histories of domination and control. Shaikh's process of "multiple critique," subverts Eurocentric framings of Muslims and challenges internal impulses towards male chauvinism, linking the different registers of struggles for a feminist project.[1]

In the vexed politics of the *ijāb*, Shaikh and Nina Hoel contend that both secularist and Islamist body-politics curtail the choice of Muslim women by stripping the veil away from women in France and forcibly donning it on their bodies in post-revolutionary Iran (Hoel and Shaikh, 2007:111). As aggressive French secularism frames the *ijāb* through the lens of a disruption of secular logic, it also maintains a xenophobic and racist body-politics that calls for the total assimilation or rejection of Muslims in European society (Hoel and Shaikh, 2007:113). In Iran, on the other hand, the state performs a similar function whereby it coerces the wearing of the veil (Hoel and Shaikh, 2007:117). As an ambivalent symbol, the veil has been deployed as a symbol of resistance to "Westoxification," however, it has also been a form of state repression that polices the expression of women.[2] By addressing underlying patriarchal control of secularism in France and Islamism in Iran, Shaikh and Hoel show how the agency of women is curtailed through state violence. The French and Iranian examples of *ijābi* body-politics exposes how women's bodies are sites of manipulation for the broader national projects (Shaikh,

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1 Shaikh's notion of "multiple critique" takes inspiration from miriam cooke, see: Shaikh, "Transforming Feminisms," 161.

2 Understood as a type of total mimicry, Westoxification was a term deployed to understand the cultural and political domination of Iranian society by the "West" (understood as the United States and Western Europe) before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Coined by intellectual Jalal al-e Ahmad, the term has come to signify a constellation of "moral dangers" imported and uncritically adopted from the West, such as relaxed moral standards (especially in terms of gender scripts), secularism, and capitalism.

2003b:151). While proposing multiple reasons why people perform Islamic practices (such as donning the *ijāb*), Shaikh shows how Muslim woman's agency is diverse. By challenging the "presumption of a universal womanhood represented only the realities of a particular group of women, namely First World, white, middle-class women," Shaikh draws on a tradition of "Third World Feminism" and calls for an alternative paradigm engaging the multivocality of Muslim experience (Shaikh, 2003b:154-155). As this epistemological category is deployed in the service of feminist and mystical modes of knowledge production, Shaikh suggests that praxis from the margins of society is a legitimate (and under-studied) expression of religiosity and therefore should be a point of orientation for Muslim ethics (Mahomed and Shaikh, 2018:135).

Taking up the limitations of her earlier work, Shaikh expands her feminist politics and engages the struggle for sexual dignity or the queer jihad (Kugle, 2005). As a multifaced struggle for justice for Muslims with queer sexualities, Shaikh not only supports the call for inclusive sociality and legality.[3] She also exposes the insidious workings of colonial feminism in sexual diversity. In a co-edited publication, Shaikh and I argued that contemporary politics of queerness is skewed by a hegemony that prefigures Muslims as inherently violent and anti-queer. Echoing earlier Orientalists and colonial tropes, the current form of sexual coloniality suggests that queer Muslims cannot exist because Islam is inherently anti-queer, and any form of reconciliation is an example of internalized oppression.

Drawing on Jasbir Puar (2007), Shaikh and I subvert these discourses by foregrounding the agency of queer Muslims to present their own embodiment of religious tradition. Complex and diverse, we suggested that Muslims with queer desires draw on the traditions of the past and to reorient their focus to support and legitimate their struggle for justice (Osman and Shaikh, 2017). Through a close reading of the case study of a queer-affirming religious space in Cape Town, we argued that queer Muslims present their own theologies by reframing dignity as a hermeneutical key unlocking the expansive vision of social justice in the Islamic tradition (Osman and Shaikh, forthcoming). Through a dialogue of fem-

[3] For an overview of the various traditional and queer-friendly legal positions on the practice of same-sex sexuality, see: Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflections on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2010).

inist politics, Islamic ideals, and intersectional experience, Shaikh develops a form of Islamic feminism attentive to the trappings of coloniality. At this point, we traditionally see a conclusion to a feminist critique. However, taking this process one step further, Shaikh deploys a final register of activism, future-orientated theological meaning-making. In the final section, I will examine her proposed theology of hope and empowerment through a close reading of her engaged approach to mysticism.

Theologies of Hope and Empowerment

During the period of decolonization, many countries embraced an engaged religiosity developing a rich legacy of spiritual politics. Read through the signifier of the "poor," Latin American Liberation theology responded to the "praxis of suffering" by reclaiming narratives of liberation to reimagine salvation (Chopp, 1986). Inspired by the activism of their comrades in faith, Islamic liberation theologians also produced discourses creatively rereading narratives, symbols, practices which affirmed the dignity of the poor. Inspired by liberatory readings of the Qurʾān (such as Creation myth or the Exodus Narrative), Muslim liberation theologians also advocated for peace with justice based on a diverse set of strategies (Rahemtulla, 2018). While liberation theology embraces praxis as the analytical key, Engaged Sufism's approach to liberation is through reframing spiritual success (Harris, 2000). In the amalgamation of personal ethical cultivation and political justice, Engaged Sufism asserts that there is a symbiotic relationship between love and public action. Shaikh explains:

> I am inspired by a central spiritual teaching at the core of my tradition, the insight that love and justice are integrally connected, that divine love is at the root of all existence and is the ontological or original womb of justice. In this regard, the Qurʾān clearly states that the command of God is *adl wa i sān*, *adl* meaning justice, and *i sān* – a more nuanced Arabic word – best translated in my view as 'goodness' that encompasses dimensions of beauty, love, and virtue collectively. In my analyses, when the impetus for social justice is driven by love, it is at its most potentially transformative and powerful (Shaikh, 2021:98).

By linking ethical cultivation with personal God-consciousness, Shaikh's engaged ethics calls for the transformation of self and society. Shaikh and Scott Kugle (2006) contend that as "Sufis strive to create sacred and just

relationships between different people, between persons and institutions, and between human society and the non-human environment" they endeavor to cultivate political and intellectual connections between love and public ethics (Shaikh and Kugle, 2006:2). They argue that personal and private action are interlinked through the cultivation of virtues, allowing spirituality to flow into the everyday through the public manifestations of justice, mercy, altruism, and generosity. They write that "spiritual development demands an ethic of care that is socially engaged. Taming, mastering, and purifying the various inclinations of the lower self is not simply an individualistic spirituality but also one that intrinsically breaks down barriers between self and 'other'" (Shaikh and Kugle, 2006:3). Taking inspiration from Sufi teacher, Junayd al-Baghdādi (d. 910), Shaikh and Kugle shift the focus from attaining spiritual ecstasy or secret knowledge of God through annihilation (*fanāʾ*) to the service of creation through subsistence or *baqāʾ*. As "states" (*a wāl)* or "stations" (*maqāmāt)* of the human spiritual journey, *fanāʾ* and *baqāʾ* represent an interconnected journey whereby the human subject is absorbed into the Divine (and gains greater intimacy and knowledge of the God) and presented to subsist (in God) for the service of creation. Through spiritual knowledge *(maʿrifa),* Muslims can get to know God more immediately.

Muslim thought has thus made the path to God accessible through knowledge of the attributes of God also called the Beautiful Names of God or *al-Asmāʾ Allāh al-Ḥusnāʾ*, presented along a spectrum of beauty (*jamāl*) and majesty (*jalāl*), the two interconnected poles have inspired a range of Muslim possibilities. Sufi's have turned to these attributes of God, as a way to understand the ontology of the Divine and its translation into sociality (Shaikh, 2012:76-78). As a theorist of Sufi metaphysics, Ibn ʿArabī bequeathed a rich legacy of mystical ethics and theology based on these attributes. In his cosmological mapping, humanity plays a central role in Divine unfolding. As the "bridge or an isthmus" connecting the material and transcendental, the human being has the potential to reflect all the Divine attributes in complete harmony resulting in the cultivation of the figure known as *al-Insān al-Kāmil* or "the Complete Human Being" (Shaikh, 2012:72). Animating Ibn ʿArabī, Shaikh says that "each person is at once a unique site of divine self-disclosure and simultaneously shares with every person the potential to comprehensively embody a balance of all divine attributes" (Shaikh, 2022a,:481). As such, through a

"polishing" of the mirror of the heart *(qalb)* the seeker can more harmoniously reflect the Divine within. Thus, through the practice of refining the self, the seeker can more clearly reflect the Divine (Shaikh, 2012:73).

In terms of a gendered sociality, Shaikh finds fluidity in Ibn ʿArabī's ideas of the human. While much of this premodern Islamic tradition supports normative gender scripts, Shaikh reads Ibn ʿArabī's spiritual philosophy as a subversion of tradition through a "supple and relational ontology" (Shaikh, 2022a:487) expanding the normative gender scripts that constrict some and uplift others. Based on her reading she contends that for Ibn ʿArabī "gender cannot be reified—that it must evade conclusive definition, that it will resist firm categorizations, that it will demand a recognition of its own irreducibility—primarily because it is an intrinsic part of the ultimate mystery of the human condition" (Shaikh, 2022a:478). As a critique of androcentric power, Shaikh says that her reading "helps to destabilize domination notions of male superiority" (Shaikh, 2012:83). Her analysis also shows how women are deploying their agency, against the dominant social system of mores, in search of an unmeditated relationship with the Divine and an engaged social praxis. One such example is Ibn ʿArabī's perspective on ritual leadership or *imāmat*. Shaikh proposes that her premodern interlocutor "de-legitimates the position of those scholars who reject women's *imāmat*" because he believes and argues that women have the same spiritual capacity as men and can therefore serve as leaders if they are knowledgeable (Shaikh, 2009:815). Translating ontological equality into social praxis, Ibn ʿArabī opens new ways of thinking exposing the limitations of Eurocentrism and Muslim patriarchy.

While Shaikh has taken Ibn ʿArabī as her creative and generative "future friendship" (drawing on Ebrahim Moosa who repurposes insights from Derrida), I am left wondering about a queer reading of an Akbarian theology (Shaikh, 2012:32). A central notion in Shaikh's reflections is the notion of "mystical union." Using the gendered metaphor of sexual union between a heterosexual couple, Ibn ʿArabī frames the intimacy of union along overlapping registers: sexual union with a partner and spiritual union with God. Shaikh writes that the "love between men and women is, therefore, tied to the essence of human origins. It is a unique theophany that has the capacity to provide humans with an apprehension of the impetus for their individual and collective existences and relationships with God" (Shaikh, 2012:185). Through the language device of metaphor, pregnant with symbolic meaning, Ibn ʿArabī describes the process

of mystical union signifying a special relationship between (hetro)sexuality and spirituality. For Ibn ʿArabī, the experience of sexual fulfillment is also known as a moment of *dhawq* giving the engaged party a "taste" of *fanā,* "annihilation" or "extinction" of the self into the Divine. Teasing out this engagement Shaikh "provides men and women with the possibilities for 'total annihilation,' because each is a locus of self-disclosure for the other" (Shaikh, 2012:185-186). While this frame flips traditional gender scripts, it also relies on the partnership of an idealized heteronormative couple framed as the bedrock of a functional society. As a form of "spiritual realization," the heterosexual pairing brings together the cosmological myth by reproducing, however dimly, the light of God's creation and unfolding (Shaikh, 2012:187). It is thus unclear if a non-normative sexual pairing might also produce such a spiritual possibility. The ambiguity of the textual silence can suggest multiple possibilities. Can Ibn ʿArabī's theory of gender support such a claim of authenticity beyond the sex binary? Although Ibn ʿArabī subverts his normative cultural framework, he also supports the heterosexual pairing (as presented by the bezel of the Prophet Muhammad in the *Fuṣūṣ*al- *ikam*) and reflects the broader social mores and sensibilities, despite a host of non-normative subcultures and gender expressions in premodern Islamicate societies that do not fall within the ambit of a gender/sexual binary (El-Rouayheb, 2005; Kugle, 2016, Peletz, 2009). In what ways can we think with Ibn ʿArabī outside of a gender binary that suggests an inclusive possibility? Despite his sexual normativity, Ibn ʿArabī could also be "disidentified" with. As a tool of survival, various marginalized communities have undertaken practices of subtle subversion because they "negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (Muñoz, 1999). As Muslims with non-normative sexualities and gender identities survive various intersections of violence, they can possibly queer the inherited traditions of wisdom by creatively "reimagining" the tradition along more inclusive possibilities and notions of justice (Omer, 2019).

Toward an Intersectional Islamic Ethic

As a final illustration of intersectional Islamic feminist theology, Saʾdiyya Shaikh co-edited a volume with Dr. Fatima Seedat called *The Women's Khutbah Book: Contemporary Sermons on Spirituality and Justice from*

Around the World (2021). In the collection of sermons delivered by Muslim women in many diverse socio-political contexts, Shaikh and Seedat placed these important interventions in dialogue with a longer tradition of "insubordinate Muslim women who have actively contested injustice" (Shaikh, 2021b:102). In this reimagining of tradition, they describe the novelty of some traditions by exposing the hidden histories of Muslim women fighting against gender injustice. As a form of "Muslim love ethics," this archive of Muslim women's voices provides "fresh theological insights and vivifying ethical possibilities in response to contemporary need" demonstrating how tradition can be adapted and configured with creative imagination (Shaikh, 2021b:103). As Atalia Omer (2019:154) contends, this type of reimagining of tradition is a "constructive tuner" that deploys tradition in service of contemporary calls for social justice and grounds activism in a deep spirituality. As religious activists reconfigure ethical values through solidarity, they present a new vision of community that is based on intersectional justice (2019:165). Through her engaged scholarship, Shaikh presents a more capacious framing of religious anthropology that is not premised on structures of violence or secular ontologies, but rather filtered through an Islamic ethics of love, compassion, and human dignity.

In this reflective essay, I have attempted to examine Shaikh's intellectual and political project of Islamic feminism through analyzing her analytical approach, "multiple critique." Through an intersectional investigation, she identifies the interlocking and complex manifestations of power in the tradition of Islam and in the communal practice of Muslims. By analyzing "questions of human wholeness from the perspective of a foundational God-human relationship" she attempts to reform problematics within the tradition, while also guarding against the workings of colonial empire (Shaikh, 2012:22). Going beyond, she also suggests that Muslims should cultivate alternative cosmic imaginaries based on ethics of love, dignity, and social justice. Shaikh's ethics is grounded not in secular commitments but in a correct relationship that explores a multivocal response to injustice by cultivating nurturing and compassionate communities.

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