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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Shemeem Burney Abbas. *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002. xxx + 209 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-70515-9.

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Published on H-Gender-MidEast (March, 2004)

(Re)Gendering Ritual/Religious Practices

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Elizabeth Fernea puts the contribution of Shemeem Burney Abbas's *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual* to scholarship on Islam and Muslim ritual practices very succinctly in her foreword to the book. Fernea points to certain lacunae and mis-recognitions among "western" scholars regarding Islamic practices. Foremost among these is a simplistic representation/understanding of Islam as a "male" religion. Fernea argues that this fallacy is a consequence of the tendency to "translate" Islam and Islamic practice into a recognizable pattern, i.e. to render it familiar. This is done, for example, by focusing on the mosque as a central site for religious observance; and on textual materials rather than lived practice. Fernea goes on to argue that such framing has led to a de-emphasis on the relevance of alternative sites of religious practice (such as the home, the street, and, in the case of this book, *sufi* shrines, festivals, and concerts); alternative voices (distinct from those that dominate mosque culture), in this case, female voices; and everyday practices. It is these biases and limitations of understanding that Abbas's book attempts to overcome through its choice of topic and field sites.

Abbas's book is an attempt to bring a more nuanced and polyvocal understanding of both Islam and women's place within it to the non-South Asian reader. The former aim is accomplished by looking beyond the mosque (which has increasingly come to be a bulwark of religious orthodoxy) to the shrine (which continues to constitute a challenge to that very limited, orthodox reading of the "meaning" of Islam). Shrines throughout the Muslim world, but in South Asia in particular, reflect the popular vision of Islam as articulated by its mystics, who are referred to by some as *sufis*. This vision stands in contradistinction to the orthodox emphasis on dogma and doctrine. Instead of conceptualizing the divine as transcendent, *sufis* see the divine as immanent. This very key distinction leads *sufis* and their followers to follow ritual practices that are quite distinct from those of Islamic orthodoxy: and it is these practices that constitute the focus of Abbas's study.

Not only do *sufi* practices frequently constitute a counterpoint to those of Islamic orthodoxy, they also have embedded in them a significant space for what Abbas calls "the female voice" and what I would refer to as the "female principle" which might even be considered a "third way" (more on this later in the review). This too adds an often-overlooked dimension in conventional studies of Islam, i.e. the incorporation and presence of "the female." By examining *sufi* ritual practices in a variety of sacred and secular settings, Abbas rightly argues that women are central to *sufi* Islam in a variety of ways: through their presence at shrines and their performance as musicians and singers of *sufi* poetry, and as a prominent narrative voice in *sufi* poetry itself. Looking at *sufi* ideas and practice thus constitutes a sharp departure from mosque-centered and textual studies of Islam wherein women are noticeable by virtue of their frequent absence rather than incorporation into the religious body (of the mosque) except on the sidelines. Abbas argues that not only are women central to *sufism* in the variety of ways just mentioned, but male singers of *sufi* lyrics recognize the significance of the female voice in such poetry and consider it central to their performances. Thus it is not only women who are drawn to the "female voice" in *sufism* but male believers and performers as well.

In order to document and validate her claims regarding the presence and significance of women and the "female voice," Abbas utilizes a multiplicity of methods. She bases her argument partially on ethnography undertaken at various field sites within and outside Pakistan. This ethnography is based on visits to shrines, concerts, and different festivals. Her presence at various *sufi* performances leads to her assertion that male performers adopt the female voice both literally and figuratively. Abbas's ethnographic study of performances in the region and

abroad, especially in the United Kingdom, allows her to demonstrate the shifts in practice even as she argues for the continued existence of ecstatic response as key to different performative contexts. She also undertakes an extensive textual analysis and translation of the poetry sung at these sites through which she effectively underscores her claim regarding the centrality of the female voice in *sufi* narratives. Finally, interviews are conducted with several prominent singers of *sufiana kalaam* (mystical poetry) such as Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Abida Parveen, and Alan Fakir, as well as ethnomusicologists and radio programmers in Sind and at Radio Pakistan. These interviews are then used to buttress the case Abbas makes for the relevance and prominence of the female voice to *sufi* beliefs, practices, and performance.

While Abbas undertakes textual analysis, it is important to bear in mind that such textuality is frequently linked to orality in the *sufi* tradition, i.e. the "texts" being analyzed are not necessarily written down but are more often than not passed down literally by "word of mouth," usually through recitation or more often, singing. This is also one reason that *sufism* has tended to be widely practiced among the popular classes, especially in South Asia, who do not have access–because of a lack of literacy and familiarity with Arabic–to the canonical Islamic texts such as the Qur'an and the *hadith*. This raises another crucial element necessary to the popularity of *sufism*–its incorporation of "the vernaculars," again in both a literal and a figurative sense: at the literal level, *sufi* poets in South Asia tended to write in the local languages, thus making their ideas comprehensible to the local population regardless of class or educational level; second, they incorporated elements (especially in their epic poetry but also in the concepts and terms they drew upon), from a variety of existing religious and folk practice and concerns. This enabled them to achieve comprehensibility in a dual sense and also made their message more relevant to the context in which they lived.

At the level of theory, Abbas states that she applies "a range of theories to interpret the data in the book" (p. xviii). She goes on to say that "I have utilized the ethnography of speaking. In addition I have applied the conversation analysis system whenever appropriate to the context. The transliteration of live speech and its context in the performances is based on a conversation analysis scheme with adaptations.... I am aware there are a number of theories about speech and performance, but I use only those that relate to my work" (pp. xviii-xix). Later in the preface she comments "I do not try to fit this book into any theoretical frame.... I let the musicians speak about the female voices, about themselves, about their linguistic resources, and about their songwriters" (p. xxiv). Abbas claims that this approach, combined with her emphasis on the context or *sama* where *sufi* poetry is performed and received, allows her to broaden the horizon of her readers and offers something missing in prior studies in this field. It is, she claims, this contextual approach that allows her to devote considerable attention to the role of women in *sufi* thought and practice.

In some basic ways, I concur with Fernea that Abbas's approach and method allows her to bring a different understanding to extant studies on Islam and women's participation and presence in religious narratives, practices, and performances. Abbas ably demonstrates that women are a vital presence at *sufi* shrines. Not only that, her transliteration of the narratives sung in the performances she frequented further supports her contention regarding the centrality of the female voice. I also thoroughly enjoyed her discussion of the difference between *qawaali* (collective harmonic singing) and *kaafi* singing. She shows the class difference between the two, and the crossover from one to the other by some of the performers. She appropriately points out that this difference occurs not only by virtue of musical training (classical versus folk) but also through the different languages deployed in the poetry (Arabic and Persian versus the vernaculars). There is ample evidence that musicians and singers such as Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Abida Parveen, who are trained and comfortable in both musical styles and also familiar with a variety of linguistic material, can reach a wider and more diverse audience than those more narrowly confined. This expansiveness also permits these singers to seek out new patrons, especially overseas.

All of these dimensions constitute the strength of the study. However, there are some problems with the work. First, I find the use of the term *sama* to be problematic: rather than being translated as "context," it can signify both "context" and "ambience" or "atmosphere" (in a social sense). By rendering it solely as "context," Abbas fails to make clear the precise meaning of the sentiment that is being evoked in a particular context. In other words, there is some linguistic slippage in the deployment of the term, which may not have been as significant had Abbas not ascribed so much currency and significance to her use of it. I do not find the claim to the status of "native" scholar which Abbas makes is particularly meaningful.

There is also some indication that this lack of a more complex understanding of linguistic terms and meanings may have resulted from the fact that the author was not entirely comfortable in the interview setting. She men-

tions how difficult these were for her, but gives us no explanation of why this should have been the case. One possible explanation may be her own educational training and upbringing in a certain class and social setting. This may explain why her interviews were somewhat stilted and awkward. It might also be the reason she conducted interviews with better known performers, and ignored those who have not become commercial successes and/or well known. It is somewhat ironic that in a study aimed at distinguishing between elite and popular forms of *sufi* music, the author unselfconsciously reproduces another form of elitism, one that favors celebrities. However, this is only one part of the problem and is one of omission (although I would argue that this choice is not random).

There is a more serious problem: in the interviews Abbas actually did conduct, while both she and the interviewees reference and point to the persistent presence of the female voice, what this signifies to the interviewees is not as clear. Abbas seems to conflate this with an identification with women, an assumption of the female "role" as the submissive and dependent beloved, and/or a recognition of the woman as oppressed and therefore purer and more able to speak to life's inequities and injustices. In the interviews, Abbas does not probe deeply enough to fully elicit the meaning of this voice to the performers. Rather, she produces a reading that is hers, not, as she claims, that of the performers. It is in this regard that Abbas's inability to separate and distinguish between sex and gender, and between gender and sexuality, becomes a conceptual problem. Partially this conceptual lack is enabled by the prominence Abbas places on epic narrative poetry where she draws attention, rightly, to the salience of women. However, what she does not address is why singers in the *sufi* tradition invariably choose to sing those segments which are in the female voice. A clearer differentiation between sex, gender, and sexuality would have been instructive. We might think of this consistent deployment of the female voice in *sufi* performance as an articulation of a "third way" in a context where alternative conceptualizations of gender and sexuality beyond the terms male and female, masculine and feminine, did not yet exist. This reading is borne out not only by the fact that so many *sufi* poets and performers, past and present, utilized the female voice in their lyrics and singing voice, but many of them also had male partners (even though some of them were married). An understanding such as Abbas's, which comprehends the female voice solely in terms of existing notions of masculinity and femininity, overlooks the vexity of existing constructions of both gender and sexuality. By constantly equating or at least conflating this "female voice" with women, Abbas overlooks the way in which gender and sexuality came to be constructed in a time and place where no independent terms yet exist(ed) for homosexuality, or at least not in socially acceptable terms. This inability to see through gender to sexuality is also evident in the singular meaning Abbas ascribes to the word *hijra*, which she translates simply as meaning "eunuch." While this is certainly the everyday understanding of the term among most Pakistanis, recent studies have shown that many of these *hijras* are transvestites and transsexuals rather than eunuchs (in the literal sense of the term). Abbas's lack of familiarity with this literature stands in the way of her pushing her analysis past the simple rendering of male and female as sex difference.

Ultimately, this same lack gets in the way of Abbas's ability to point to the truly subversive meanings of the very poetry she translates. The radical nature of *sufiana kalaam* resides not only, as Abbas correctly points out, in an empathetic understanding of the underdog, and a critique of existing social privilege (e.g. the critique of social status and caste status articulated in *sufi* thought and music), not only in a critique of patriarchy and privileging of women and the female voice, but in a recognition of the relation between devotion and desire. The strength of Abbas's work, i.e. her emphasis on women in *sufi* ritual practice and performance, ultimately comes to constitute the limitation of this work: it does not go past women. This also limits the author from fully comprehending the gendering process at work. While cognizant of the presence and significance of desire in this form of music and devotional ritual practice, its multiple meanings are not entirely grasped or fully articulated by the author.

In conclusion, I would like to state that this book will be of great interest to students of Islam and create a better understanding of its multiple expressions. It should also add to the body of scholarship on *sufi* Islam initiated by scholars such as Anne-Marie Schimmel. Another genre of work to which it makes a significant contribution is that of women and religion. It also lays the ground for further studies into the area of the relation between ritual, gender, and sexuality; as well as for more focused work on historical and present day constructions of "tradition" (in this case *sufi* traditions) and their relationship to hybridity. I found Abbas's discussion of the existence of hybridity in the *sufi* corpus especially fascinating, and find that it raises interesting questions about the relationship between tradition and authenticity that move us away from fixing these terms in time and place. The lacks that I have pointed to should also serve to generate new

interest in questions of sex, gender, and sexuality in the Islamic "tradition," as well as the relation in *sufi* Islam between this-worldly and other-worldly devotion and desire. One possible direction future research might take is to look at these themes through the individual histories of *sufi* poets and performers and their works.

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Citation: Shahnaz Rouse. Review of Abbas, Shemeem Burney, *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India.* H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. March, 2004.
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