Mind the Gap

The Spiritual Progress of Early Ṣūfī Women

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Abstract : Since the publication of his biographical dictionary of Ṣūfī women (*Dhikr al-niswa al-muta*^{c}*abbidāt al-ṣūfiyyāt*), Abū ^{c}Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) has been hailed for recognizing the spiritual capacities of women in ways that exceeded his contemporaries. Rkia E. Cornell describes early women's Ṣūfism, about which little was known until recently, as a "veiled tradition." But apart from this biographical dictionary, al-Sulamī's other writings manifest the presumptions of his male scholarly contemporaries : he describes women as deficient in intellect and religion and encourages pious men to avoid their company, which jeopardizes men's spiritual progress. This chapter explores the path of spiritual progress for women, examining the "gap" in al-Sulamī's writings between women honored as spiritual elites worthy of companionship and "ordinary" women who stand as potential threats to men's religious growth. The author argues that Cornell's "theology of servitude" remains the least inadequate descriptor for the spiritual path of early Ṣūfī women but that *Dhikr al-niswa* presents neither an unambiguous way to articulate a gendered difference between male Ṣūfism and female Ṣūfism nor a clear set of concrete practices women used to overcome their supposed weakness and deficiency.

Résumé : Depuis la publication de son dictionnaire biographique des femmes soufies (*Dhikr al-niswa al-muta*^{c}*abbidāt al-ṣūfiyyāt*), Abū ^{c}Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (m. 412/1021) a été encensé pour avoir su reconnaître les capacités spirituelles des femmes suivant des voies bien différentes de celles de ses contemporains. Rkia E. Cornell décrit le soufisme féminin des débuts, dont on ne savait pas grand-chose jusqu'à récemment, comme une « tradition voilée ». Mais en dehors de ce dictionnaire biographique, les autres écrits d'al-Sulamī manifestent les mêmes préjugés de ses contemporains masculins dans le monde du savoir : il décrit les femmes comme déficientes sur le plan intellectuel et religieux et encourage les hommes pieux à éviter leur compagnie qui compromet leur propre progrès spirituel. Ce chapitre explore le chemin du progrès spirituel des femmes, en examinant le décalage dans les écrits d'al-Sulamī entre les femmes honorées comme membres de l'élite spirituelle, qui sont dignes de compagnie, et les femmes « ordinaires », qui représentent des menaces potentielles pour la croissance religieuse des hommes. L'auteur soutient que la « théologie de la servitude » proposée par Cornell reste l'outil le moins inadéquat pour décrire le cheminement spirituel des premières femmes soufies, mais que le *Dhikr al-niswa* ne présente ni une manière non ambiguë d'articuler une différence de genre entre le soufisme masculin et le soufisme féminin, ni un ensemble clair de pratiques concrètes que les femmes ont utilisées pour surmonter leur faiblesse et leur déficience supposées.

Mots-clés : al-Sulamī, *taṣawwuf,* Ṣūfism, soufisme, *ṭabaqāt*, biographical dictionaries, dictionnaires biographiques, women's mysticism, mysticisme féminin, spiritualité médiévale, medieval spirituality

In twelfth-century Germany, a monk named Guibert described the Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen (d. 575/1179) in this way : she "transcended female subjection by a lofty height and is equal to the eminence of not just any men but of the very highest."[1] Guibert's assumption about female subjection was shared by Hildegard herself, who never claimed a right to teach or claimed equality with men, but used the status of a "poor little female" as creative rhetorical leverage. She said she lived in a "womanish age" in which the men to whom God had entrusted the divine mysteries – the clergy – had shirked their responsibilities, and so God confounded them by making this woman virile.[2] Hildegard took her strongest stand on what was then perceived as her worst disability, her feminine frailty, framing this as a demonstration that human impotence can be a sign and prelude of divine empowerment.[3]

In this essay, I explore whether a similar dynamic exists in the writings of the Ṣūfī master Abū ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021).[4] Al-Sulamī has been hailed for recognizing the spiritual capacities of women in ways that exceeded his contemporaries. His biographical dictionary of Ṣūfī women, *Dhikr al-niswa al-mutaᶜabbidāt al-ṣūfiyyāt,* is the earliest collection focusing on women mystics. It describes women who kept company with the male spiritual masters of their day, including anecdotes about these men coming to Ṣūfī women for spiritual advice and the same women rebuking men for their mistakes. But apart from this text, discovered and published less than three decades ago, al-Sulamī's other writings manifest the presumptions of his male scholarly contemporaries : he describes women as deficient in intellect and religion and encourages pious men to avoid their company, which jeopardizes men's spiritual progress. An anecdote from al-Sulamī's entry on Malika bint Aḥmad ibn Ḥayyawayh (fl. late $4^{th}/10^{th}$ C.) sums up the prevailing mentality : a Ṣūfī master encountered Malika and her husband al-Ḥasan, whom al-Sulamī knew personally, and informed al-Ḥasan that despite the fact that Malika was a woman, her spiritual state was greater than his.[5] Isolated reports like this about holy women did little or nothing to challenge gender norms of the day. To the contrary, they served to reinforce the social status quo.[6] For Laury Silvers, the fact that an exceptional woman will be praised in Ṣūfī literature by being called a "man" or referred to in sexually neuter ways simply confirms men's power to authorize women's value.[7]

I would like, therefore, to probe the path of spiritual progress for women, examining the "gap" in al-Sulamī's writings between women honored as spiritual elites worthy of companionship and "ordinary" women who stand as threats to men. One can glean from al-Sulamī's texts a sketch of the stages of religio-moral growth through which male aspirants will likely pass, the *maqāmāt,* or "stations" of Ṣūfism. Al-Sulamī does

1. Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom : St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine,* New edition, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997, p. 2.

2. Newman, *Sister of Wisdom,* p. 3.

3. Newman, *Sister of Wisdom,* p. 35.

4. I dedicate this essay to John O. Voll, praying that it provides a fuller answer to a question he once asked me ; and offer it in remembrance of my mother, who was not a Ṣūfī but nevertheless received wise men seeking her advice and graciously gave it. May she rest in peace.

5. Al-Sulamī, Abū ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān, *Early Sufi Women : Dhikr an-niswa al-muta'abbidāt aṣ-ṣūfiyyāt*, Cornell, Rkia E. (ed. and trans.), Fons Vitae, Louisville, 1999, pp. 232-3.

6. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, p. 18.

7. Silvers, Laury (2015), "Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women", *in* Ridgeon, Lloyd (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 47.

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not, however, provide a clear trajectory for women's spiritual progress. One finds instead a substantial gap between the women who have somehow overcome their bodily limitations and the women who remain bound by them, without obvious indications of how the former reached that goal. The careful and meritorious research of Rkia E. Cornell and Silvers has recovered much of the social and historical context of these early Ṣūfī women, but neither they nor others have addressed this problem as I frame it here ; Cornell's hypothesis that Ṣūfī women embrace a "theology of servitude" provides only a partial explanation. I will explore Cornell's ideas here, with particular attention to the role companionship plays in spiritual progress and al-Sulamī's repeated discouragement of social mixing between men and women. This investigation will thus challenge aspects of Cornell's hypothesis but broadly reaffirm it with qualifications. [8]

1 Women in biographical dictionaries

Decades ago, the renowned orientalist Annemarie Schimmel noted that to speak about the equality of men and women in Islam is anachronistic in the modern feminist sense of equality, but that the realm of mysticism is the one place in which Muslim women should be considered truly the equals of men. [9] Schimmel made this comment before al-Sulamī's *Dhikr al-niswa* had been rediscovered. Scholars had long known that al-Sulamī penned this work but had thought it forever lost and relied on other sources for their knowledge of Ṣūfī women. [10] While sources like Ibn Sa^{c}d (d. 230/845), [11] Abū Nu^{c}aym (d.430/1038), [12] al-Hujwīrī (d. 469/1077), [13] Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201), [14] and Jāmī (d. 898/1492) [15] had merits for this research, each also carried marked

8. I composed this essay before reading the recent article on this subject by Christopher Melchert, who also engages Cornell at length and with whom I am in substantial agreement ; I have revised the contents slightly to reflect Melchert's contribution, as well as some other recent publications. Melchert (2016), "Before *Ṣūfiyyāt* : Female Renunciants in the 8th and 9th centuries CE", *Journal of Sufi Studies,* Vol. 5, pp. 115-139.

9. Schimmel, Annemarie, *L'islam au feminin : la femme dans la spiritualité musulmane,* Albin Michel, Paris, 2000, p. 16.

10. To take the most prominent example, Ruth Roded's pioneering study necessarily omitted *Dhikr al-niswa,* as al-Sulamī's text had not yet been published. Roded, Ruth, *Women in Islamic Biographical Literature : From Ibn Sa^{c}d to* Who's Who, Lynne Rienner, London, 1994.

11. With the exception of Ibn Sa^{c}d's *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, no compiler of a biographical dictionary prior to Ibn al-Jawzī devoted to women more than 10% of the total number of entries in the work. According to Roded, quantitative analysis rejects the notion that women were cited only as exceptions to a male-dominated rule ; rather, women were recognized as the exemplars and precedents that they were. Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Literature,* pp. 2-3.

12. Roded rightly notes that Abū Nu^{c}aym devotes only 4% of the entries in *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'* to women, and in this regard his recollection of Ṣūfī women is particularly disappointing. Drawing on both al-Sulamī's *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* and al-Sulamī's now-lost *Tārīkh al-ṣūfiyya,* Abū Nu^{c}aym's tenth volume of *Ḥilyat al-awliyā',* devoted exclusively to Ṣūfīs, contains no entries on female Ṣūfīs.

13. While al-Hujwīrī includes some colorful anecdotes about important women when he discusses male Ṣūfī masters, he does not devote a single entry of the 109 entries in *Kashf al-maḥjūb* to a woman. Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Literature,* p. 92.

14. Ibn al-Jawzī showed far more interest in the lives of these women than did his predecessors, devoting over 20% of *al-Muntaẓam fī tārīkh al-mulūk wa-l-umam* to women. Silvers argues that this reflects a genealogical impulse to collect everything and omit nothing ; rather than revealing any proto-feminist inclination, Ibn al-Jawzī's misogynist streak is evident. Silvers (2010), "'God Loves Me' : The Theological Content and Context of Early Pious and Sufi Women's Sayings on Love", *Journal for Islamic Studies,* Vol. 30, pp. 36-7.

15. In terms of historical value, any comments Jāmī makes about Ṣūfī women can easily be discovered in earlier works ; his contribution rests in certain editorial choices. One interesting difference lies in the entry for Fāṭima al-Barda^{c}iyya (fl. mid-4th/10th C.). Cornell mistakenly translates a passage from al-Sulamī

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limitations. Thus, Cornell's 1999 English translation and fine study of al Sulamī's text immediately met widespread interest. [16] One sees the extent of this interest especially in the translations of it : Cornell's book has been translated into Persian and Bahasa Indonesia, while other translators have rendered al-Sulamī's biographical dictionary into French, Italian, and portions into Spanish. [17] To put this work into context, one must compare it with *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya,* al-Sulamī's well-known biographical dictionary of Ṣūfī men and arguably his most important work. [18] Many later prominent figures, including Abū Nuᶜaym, Ibn al-Jawzī, and Jāmī, drew heavily on *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* and nearly all major modern studies on Ṣūfism in the formative period refer to it frequently. This formidable text, however, was translated into French only last year, and few of al-Sulamī's shorter treatises have been translated into more than two European languages. [19] Al-Sulamī's biographical dictionary of Ṣūfī women, considered lost only three decades ago, has quickly become the most widely available work in his corpus. In it, he includes entries for eighty-two different Ṣūfī women and attributes teachings to each of them, on their own authority.

In order to properly understand the distinctive contribution of al-Sulamī's *Dhikr al-niswa,* some summary comments about the *ṭabaqāt* genre should precede a discussion of the text. [20] Biographical dictionaries, or *ṭabaqāt,* are prose works structured around entries on individual persons. Entries often follow a fixed and formulaic pattern established by the author. While a reader who explores enough entries to understand this pattern can glean the specific traits and distinguishing marks of the person described in an entry, these works on the whole function to consistently promote a certain set of virtues or practices, usually emphasizing the commonality shared by the persons remembered. Biographical dictionaries provide a mirror to the civilization described,

"one of the shaykhs asked Fāṭima al-Bardaᶜiyya," when the Arabic text unambiguously states that Fāṭima asked one of them. Jāmī inverts the subject and writes that one of the shaykhs asked Fāṭima, in accord with Cornell's translation. Whether this reflects a lost variant manuscript tradition or a variant oral tradition cannot be determined. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* pp. 150-1 ; al-Jāmī, Nūr al-Dīn ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān, *Nafaḥāt al-uns*, Lees, William Nassau (ed.), Maṭbaᶜ Līsī, Calcutta, 1858, p. 723

16. Citations of al-Sulamī's *Dhikr al-niswa* refer to the page numbering in Cornell's work, a facing-page English-Arabic translation. The Arabic text has been published, among other places, in *Majmūᶜa-i āthār Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (Collected Works on Early Sufism),* Pourjavady, Nasrollah ; Sūrī, Muḥammad (eds.), Markaz-i Nashr-i Dānishgāhī, Tehran, 2009-10, vol. 3, pp. 483-532. Many of Cornell's comments in the introduction appear, in degrees of summary or revision, in "Introduction : As-Sulami and His Sufi Women", *in* Ridgeon, Lloyd V.J. (ed.), *Sufism : Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies*, Routledge, New York, 2008, vol. 1, pp. 94-130 ; and "Sufi Women's Spirituality : A Theology of Servitude", *in* Cornell, Vincent J. (ed.), *Voices of Islam,* Praeger Publishers, Westport, 2007, vol. 2, pp. 167-174.

17. Translated and edited by Maryam Hosseini as *Nakhostin-i Zanan-i Sufi,* Nashr-i 'Ilm, Tehran, 2007 ; translated by Ahsin Mohammad as *Sufi-Sufi Wanita : Tradisi yang Tercadari,* Pustaka Hidaya, Bandung, Indonesia, 2004 ; translated by ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān Andreucci as *Femmes soufies / La sainteté féminine dans l'hagiographie islamique*, Entrelacs, Paris, 2011 ; translated by Giancarlo Rizzo as *Donne sûfî : La santità islamica al femminile*, Il leone verde, Turin, 2011 ; selections translated by Ḥasan Bize and Ibrāhīm Estomba as *Anécdotas y enseñanzas santas sufis*, La Tablada, Buenos Aires, 2011.

18. Mojaddedi, Jawid A., *The Biographical Tradition in Sufism : The Ṭabaqāt Genre from al-Sulamī to Jāmī,* Curzon Press, Richmond, 2001, p. 38.

19. *Les générations des Soufis :* Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya *de Abū ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān, Muḥammad b. Ḥusayn al-Sulamī (325/937 – 412/1021)*, Thibon, Jean-Jacques (trans.), Brill, Leiden, 2019.

20. This summary is primarily indebted to the research of Wadād al-Qāḍī. For a brief summary of her mature thinking about Arabic biographical literature, see "In the Footsteps of Arabic Biographical Literature : A Journey, Unfinished, in the Company of Knowledge", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies,* Vol. 68, No 4, 2009, pp. 241-6 ; for more detailed reflections, including fuller bibliographies, see "Biographical Dictionaries : Inner Structure and Cultural Significance", *in* Atiyeh, George N. (ed.) *The Book in the Islamic World,* SUNY Press, Albany, 1995, pp. 93-122, and "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholars' Alternative History of the Muslim Community", *in* Endress, Gerhard ; Filali-Ansary, Abdou (eds.), *Organizing Knowledge*, Brill, Leiden, 2006, pp. 23-75.

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what Wadād al-Qāḍī calls an "alternative history" to the politically focused historical narrative advanced by other chroniclers. [21] This alternative history used knowledge as an organizing principle and thus subverted powerful institutions in favor of an amorphous group of individuals, as the individual is the locus in which knowledge resides. [22] Restricted biographical dictionaries focused on a certain profession highlight even more clearly the continuity between the key players in this search for knowledge ; these texts manifest the author's desire to foreground a particular discipline as a privileged means of acquiring *ᶜilm*, garnering divine favor, and enriching and sustaining Islamic society. Al-Sulamī's contributions to this genre are restricted biographical dictionaries, as they concern only persons that share a particular characteristic : Ṣūfism as al-Sulamī understands it. Research on this literature by modern scholars has flowered in recent decades, as debates continue about whether texts like al-Sulamī's should be considered "hagiography," [23] "biography," [24] "bio-hagiography," [25] "sacred biography," [26] or in some other way. [27] None of these adequately captures the whole of al-Sulamī's project. In sum, it suffices to say that his intention is to legitimate the holiness of the persons he describes, to transmit their saving knowledge in a manner credible in the epistemological climate of his day, and to do this within the well-established genre of *ṭabaqāt*. While his works do preserve information of great use to modern historians,

21. Al-Qāḍī, "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholars' Alternative History", p. 25.

22. For the most comprehensive study of the concept of knowledge in Islam, including the claim that *ᶜilm* enjoyed an importance in Islamic civilization that knowledge did not in other civilizations, see Rosenthal, Franz, *Knowledge Triumphant : The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam,* Brill, Leiden, 1970, 2007.

23. Gerhard Böwering favors this term. See "al-Sulamī," *EI2,* and "The Major Sources of Sulamī's Minor Qurʾān Commentary", *Oriens,* Vol. 35, 1996, p. 37, among other places.

24. Tarif Khalidi uses this term to discuss entries in Sulamī's *Ṭabaqāt,* as does Thibon, though the latter acknowledges that it is "toutefois excessif." Mojaddedi also favors "biography," though he rejects positivist historians who treat works of *ṭabaqāt* as if they were repositories of historical facts. Khalidi, Tarif, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 206 ; Thibon, Jean-Jacques, *L'œuvre d'Abū ᶜAbd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī (325/937-412/1021) et la formation du soufisme*, Institut français du Proche-Orient, Damascus, 2009, p. 331 ; Mojaddedi, *The Biographical Tradition in Sufism,* pp. 180-1.

25. Chiabotti, Francesco (2014), "ᶜAbd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) : Family Ties and Transmission in Nishapur's Sufi Milieu during the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries", *in* Mayeur-Jaouen, Catherine ; Papas, Alexandre (eds.), *Family Portraits with Saints : Hagiography, Sanctity, and Family in the Muslim World,* Klaus Schwarz Verlag, Berlin, p. 259.

26. Cornell uses this term to describe *Dhikr al-niswa.* She cites Thomas Heffernan's definition of "sacred biography" as "a narrative text of the vita of the saint written by a member of a community of belief," but very few of the entries in either *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* or *Dhikr al-niswa* could be considered "narrative" or a "vita" in the way Heffernan uses those terms. Islamic literature classified as *maghāzī* or *sīra* conforms better to Heffernen's definition than do the individual entries in al-Sulamī's *Tabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* or *Dhikr al-niswa.* John Wansbrough's argument that texts like Ibn Isḥāq's (d. ca. 150/767) *Sīrat rasūl Allāh* should be read as sacred history or salvation history is well-known, but even *ṭabaqāt* texts that move away from a homiletic style toward the establishment of well-attested facts, works like those of al-Wāqidī (d. 207/823) and his secretary Ibn Saᶜd, retain an understanding of this history as sacred at its core. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* p. 39 ; Heffernen, Thomas, *Sacred Biography : Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988, pp. 15-16 ; Wansbrough, John, *The Sectarian Milieu : Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978 ; Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, p. 44.

27. In the end, the best means to discuss al-Sulamī's writing in this area remains the term "biographical dictionary." Ongoing conflicts about the nature, purpose, and style of that genre persist, but the term nonetheless denotes an identifiable corpus of medieval texts whose contents are largely agreed upon. Al-Qāḍī, "Biographical Dictionaries as the Scholars' Alternative History", p. 24. Francophone scholars seem less dissatisfied with the term *dictionnaire biographique* than do their anglophone colleagues ; those who shy away from the term generally retain the transliterated Arabic *ṭabaqāt.* For a seminal discussion, see Hafsi, Ibrahim (1976), "Recherches sur le genre « *Ṭabaqāt* » dans la littérature arabe I", *Arabica,* Vol. 23, No 3, pp. 227-265 ; Hafsi, Ibrahim (1977), "Recherches sur le genre « *Ṭabaqāt* » dans la littérature arabe II", *Arabica,* Vol. 24, No 1, pp. 1-41 ; Hafsi, Ibrahim (1977), "Recherches sur le genre « *Ṭabaqāt* » dans la littérature arabe III", *Arabica*, Vol. 24, No 2, pp. 150-186.

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he labors in a different discipline : he intends to communicate saving truths, not to record historical "facts."

Some stylistic features of *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* and *Dhikr al-niswa* are consistent. First, al-Sulamī focuses his attention on the teachings transmitted. Individual entries usually lack specificity about a person's accomplishments other than the person's name, locus, and teachers. At first glance, the women seem short-changed by comparison : al-Sulamī often truncates their names, only rarely gives their dates of death, and provides few other details that could render these entries "biographical" in any way. [28] This could be a function of the relative length of the entries : women's entries rarely run longer than one page in a modern edition and often consist only of a few lines, while entries for men in *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* are much longer. [29] Before emphasizing the dissimilarity in al-Sulamī's work here, one must compare *Dhikr al-niswa* with the portrayals of women in other biographical dictionaries. Later compilers frequently remember women mystics in a nebulous way ; the women are either formally or functionally anonymous, with little concrete identity. [30] Ibn al-Jawzī provides the strongest example : many of his stories simply refer to "a devout woman." Al-Sulamī's women lack the fullness of "personality" seen in the men al-Sulamī recalls in *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya,* but providing this is not his purpose. He provides enough detail to establish the authority of each woman as an individual and then quickly redirects his focus to the teachings themselves, the driving force of both *Dhikr al-niswa* and *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya.* Second, one may observe that in both texts, al-Sulamī refrains from imposing a false unity on the Ṣūfī community. He acknowledges that significant developments occurred in the growth and spread of *taṣawwuf,* but he frames the diversity among these figures in a way that does not jeopardize the overall coherence of the tradition and the larger continuity of the Ṣūfī movement with the *sunna* of the Prophet. [31]

Despite the obvious similarities, significant stylistic and structural differences distinguish *Dhikr al-niswa* from *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya.* Two merit brief discussion : al-Sulamī's use of narrative in *Dhikr al-niswa* and the different role that *ḥadīth* transmission plays in the two works. Regarding the former, by comparison with *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya,* al-Sulamī is more likely to transmit anecdotes about Ṣūfī women. These brief narratives often treat the women's interaction with, and occasionally, their stinging rebukes of, Ṣūfī shaykhs known from *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya,* even though narratives from those men's lives usually do not appear in *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya.* In al-Sulamī's other treatises, he narrates short vignettes about events in the lives of important shaykhs, but in *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya,* he usually strips the masters' sayings of any context. [32] *Dhikr*

28. Thibon, *L'œuvre d'Abū ᶜAbd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī*, pp. 331-4.

29. Al-Sulamī's conclusion to *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* says that he offers roughly twenty sayings for each of the Ṣūfī masters chronicled there. Even the entry for Rābiᶜa al-ᶜAdawiyya (d. 185/801), the longest in *Dhikr al-niswa,* provides only half this. Al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya,* Shurayba, Nūr al-Dīn (ed.), Maktabat al-Khānijī, Cairo, 1969, p. 518 ; *Les générations des Soufis,* p. 395.

30. Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Literature,* pp. 91-3 ; Silvers, "Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women", p. 25.

31. Melchert, Christopher (1996), "The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.", *Studia Islamica,* Vol. 83, p. 53 ; Chabbi, Jacqueline (1977), "Remarques sur le développement historique des mouvements ascétiques et mystiques au Khurasan", *Studia Islamica,* Vol. 46, p. 69 ; Palmer, Aiyub (2020), "Sufism", *in* Brown, Daniel W. (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell Concise Companion to the Hadith,* Wiley Blackwell, Chichester, pp. 269-271.

32. Whence Melchert's comment, "Al-Sulamī seems to be much less interested in practice, more in wise sayings." Melchert, "Before *ṣūfiyyāt*", 126.

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al-niswa provides comparatively more examples of colorful interpersonal exchanges that manifest the wisdom of female Ṣūfīs. A second and more significant structural difference between these biographical dictionaries is the absence of *ḥadīth* transmission as an element that legitimates the standing of female Ṣūfīs. Many of the entries in *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* begin by identifying at least one Prophetic report that the Ṣūfī master in question had transmitted ; al-Sulamī frames these Ṣūfī masters as men who valued *ḥadīth* and dedicated themselves to preserving this source of knowledge. In the context of his oeuvre, the priority al-Sulamī gives to Prophetic *ḥadīth*s in *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* serves a twofold function. First, it emphasizes the irreducibly great value of the Prophet's words and deeds for the believing community. Second, it functions in tandem with al-Sulamī's means of preserving teachings of Ṣūfī masters who preceded him, something he also accomplishes by using *isnād*s. Some have thus commented that his collection of qur'ānic glosses by famous Ṣūfī shaykhs reads like a *tafsīr bi-l-ma'thūr,*[33] and thus with good cause, Jean-Jacques Thibon identifies "*muḥaddith*" as one of the three central dimensions of al-Sulamī's personality.[34] Only the second of these two functions occurs throughout *Dhikr al-niswa,* which preserves the teachings of these Ṣūfī women using *isnād*s. Unlike *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya,* al-Sulamī does not attempt to validate these women by framing them as transmitters of Prophetic *ḥadīth*s ; he only identifies one woman, Ziyāda bint al-Khaṭṭāb al-Ṭazariyya (fl. early $4^{th}/10^{th}$ C.), as a *ḥadīth* transmitter.[35] This absence does not surprise, given the dominance of males in this field, but it is a significant structural difference between the two biographical dictionaries.[36]

2 Al-Sulamī on the status of women : a dilemma

I see one basic dilemma in the interpretation of *Dhikr al-niswa* in the context of al-Sulamī's larger corpus. On the one hand, *Dhikr al-niswa* holds up a large number of women as masters of the spiritual life. He records male Ṣūfī masters coming to these women for guidance and advice and at times records these women correcting and chastising men regarded in their own day as giants of the Ṣūfī tradition. On the other hand, al-Sulamī generally presumes that women are deficient by comparison with men and he instructs men, on his own authority and on the authority of others, that they should avoid companionship with women. Outside of this one text, al-Sulamī's

33. Silvers, Laury, *A Soaring Minaret : Abu Bakr al-Wasiti and the Rise of Baghdadi Sufism,* SUNY Press, Albany, 2010, p. 9.

34. Thibon, *L'œuvre d'Abū ᶜAbd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī*, pp. 131-164.

35. Al-Sulamī mentions this about her but does not identify any particular reports she transmitted. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* pp. 230-1.

36. We know, of course, that certain women, especially ᶜĀ'isha, were key figures in the *isnād*s of many important reports, but that as an increasing number of male transmitters traveled widely in search of reports, the need for female transmitters diminished and social exigencies led to male dominance over this field of knowledge, with certain exceptions. Fāṭima bint Abī ᶜAlī l-Daqqāq (d. 480/1088), the wife of ᶜAbd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) and daughter of one of al-Sulamī's main scholarly contemporaries in Nishapur, was one such transmitter, as she benefited both from her heritage in a well-known scholarly family and her long lifespan. Silvers, "'God Loves Me"', pp. 36-7 ; Thibon (2016), "Women Mystics in Medieval Islam : Practice and Transmission", *Religions* (Doha), Vol. 8, pp. 67-8. For further discussion of the relationship between Prophetic reports and distinctively Ṣūfī knowledge, see Karamustafa, Ahmet T., *Sufism : The Formative Period*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2007, p. 90 ; Melchert (2012), "Abū Nu'aym's Sources for *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*, Sufi and Traditionist", *in* Gobillot, Geneviève ; Thibon, Jean-Jacques (eds.) *Les maîtres soufis et leurs disciples : IIIe-Ve siècles de l'hégire (IXe-XIe s.),* Institut français du Proche-Orient, Damascus, pp. 145-159.

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disparagement of women is consistent throughout his writings. Cornell's exuberant introduction to *Dhikr al-niswa* downplays this latter fact and illustrates the dilemma. She sees in this text al-Sulamī's witness that these women contributed more to the growth of their more famous male counterparts than is often acknowledged, as well as al-Sulamī's "unique concern with disproving Muslim stereotypes about woman's supposed lack of religion and intellect."[37] Whether al-Sulamī attempts to subvert these assumptions for women generally or only for female spiritual adepts,[38] Cornell considers it certain that the women remembered in *Dhikr al-niswa* are, in the eyes of al-Sulamī, "fully the equals" of the men remembered in *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* and that he attempts "to demonstrate that Sufi women possess levels of intellect (*ᶜaql*) and wisdom (*ḥikma*) that are equivalent to those of Sufi men."[39]

If it is true that al-Sulamī considers these Ṣūfī women the equals of their male counterparts, al-Sulamī's writings elsewhere demonstrate that he does not hold this assumption for women generally. To take the most glaring example, al-Sulamī states directly, in at least two places, that women are deficient in religion and intellect and cites reports about the Prophet as support for this assumption.[40] When he discusses the qur'ānic injunction to deal honorably with women, *wa ᶜāshirūhunna bi-l-maᶜrūf,* he connects the passage to this deficiency.[41] God created this deficiency in women, and therefore, what constitutes honorable treatment derives from acknowledgement of this divine intent. One should not expect from women things for which God has not made them. This statement in *Kitāb ādāb al-ṣuḥba* appears directly beside a statement attributed to ᶜAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, "The intellect of a woman is her beauty and the beauty of a man is his intellect."[42] Later in the same treatise, al-Sulamī transmits the Prophetic *ḥadīth,* "A woman is like a rib. If you straighten her, you will break her. If you live with her, you live with her crookedness."[43]

37. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* p. 46.

38. The scope of Cornell's claim about al-Sulamī's agenda vacillates ; her assessment of al-Sulamī's assumptions about women generally is not clear. *Cf.* al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* pp. 46, 50, 58, 70.

39. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 48, 50, 70.

40. Al-Sulamī, *Kitāb ādāb al-ṣuḥba,* Kister, M.J. (ed.), Israel Oriental Society, Jerusalem, 1954, p. 51, reprinted in *Majmūᶜa-i āthār Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī,* vol. 2, pp. 31-132 ; *Bayān tadhallul al-fuqarā',* in *Majmūᶜa-i āthār Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī,* vol. 3, pp. 17-62, #44. In *Kitāb ādāb al-ṣuḥba,* al-Sulamī cites in connection with this teaching the *ḥadīth,* "Regarding deficiencies of intellect and religion, I have not seen anyone more capable of leading the minds of sensible men astray than you women." In *Bayān tadhallul al-fuqarā',* al-Sulamī cites the report, "A man is not alone with a woman unless the third with them is Satan." For these reports and parallels indicating women's deficiency in intellect and religion, see al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, K. al-ḥayḍ* (6), *B. tark al-ḥā'iḍ al-ṣawm* (6) ; *K. al-zakāt* (24), *B. al-zakāt ᶜalā l-aqārib* (44) ; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, K. al-īmān* (1), *B. bayān nuqṣān al-īmān bi-naqṣ al-ṭāᶜāt* (34) ; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan, K. al-sunna* (39), *B. al-dalīl ᶜalā ziyādat al-īmān wa-nuqṣānihi* (15) ; al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiᶜ, K. al-riḍāᶜ* (10), *B. mā jā'a fī karāhiyyat al-dukhūl ᶜalā al-mughībāt* (16) ; *K. al-fitan* (31), *B. mā jā'a fī luzūm al-jamāᶜa* (7) ; *K. al-īmān* (38), *B. fī istikmāl al-īmān wa-l-ziyāda wa-l-nuqṣān* (6) ; Ibn Māja, *Sunan, K. al-fitan* (36), *B. fitnat al-nisā'* (19) ; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad,* #4151 [v. 1, p. 436] ; #5343 [v. 2, pp. 66-67] ; #8862 [v. 2, pp. 373-374] ; #14651 [v. 3, p. 339] ; #15696 [v. 3, p. 446] ; see also Abū Nuᶜaym, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā' wa-ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyā',* Dār al-Kutub al-ᶜIlmiyya, Beirut, 1997, vol. 9, p. 249.

41. Q. 4 : 19 ; al-Sulamī, *Kitāb ādāb al-ṣuḥba,* p. 51.

42. Al-Sulamī, *Kitāb ādāb al-ṣuḥba,* p. 51 ; *cf.* al-Majlisī, Muḥammad Bāqir, *Biḥār al-anwār,* al-Maktaba al-Islāmiyya, Tehran, 1969, vol. 103, ch. 59 (*faḍl ḥubb al-nisā'*), #3.

43. Al-Sulamī, *Kitāb ādāb al-ṣuḥba,* p. 82 ; al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, K. al-nikāḥ* (67), *B. al-mudārā maᶜa l-nisā'* (79) ; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, K. al-riḍāᶜ* (17), *B. al-waṣiyya bi-l-nisā'* (65) ; al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiᶜ, K. al-ṭalāq wa-l-liᶜān* (11), *B. mā jā'a fī mudārāt al-nisā'* (12) ; al-Dārimī, *Musnad, K. al-nikāḥ* (17), *B. mudārāt al-rajul ahlahu* (35) ; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad,* #9524 [v. 2, p. 428] ; #9795 [v. 2, p. 449] ; #10856 [v. 2, p. 530] ; #26384 [v. 6, p. 279] ; *cf.* #21454 [v. 5, p. 164] ; #21339 [v. 5, p. 151].

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Occasional comments like this should not lead one to overemphasize al-Sulamī's derogation of women. Like many authors of the period, he generally ignores women and says little about them. For al-Sulamī, the prototypical Ṣūfī is male and references to women are infrequent in his texts. It is true, however, that with the exception of *Dhikr al-niswa,* nearly every comment al-Sulamī makes about women serves to disparage them or discourage companionship with them. *Dhikr al-niswa* speaks explicitly about cross-gender companionship ; no fewer than twenty entries refer to a female Ṣūfī keeping company with a man. [44] This density of material certainly amounts to al-Sulamī's endorsement of cross-gender companionship in that text, but outside of that biographical dictionary I count at least seven different writings in which al-Sulamī forbids such companionship and none in which he acknowledges its permissibility. The genre of these texts certainly affects this prohibition : several of the treatises in question have an apologetic intent. Al-Sulamī knew that some believers were concerned about social mixing between Ṣūfī men and women and he desired to solidify the social palatability of *taṣawwuf* in Khurasan. The scandal of mixed-gender companionship recurs in other biographical dictionaries as well. These texts typically insist that men and women who met for prayer, study, or spiritual direction did so for purely spiritual purposes, never for lustful or worldly motives, [45] and such descriptions are consistent with *Dhikr al-niswa.*

Dhikr al-niswa thus challenges a scholar to weigh one text against the remainder of an author's corpus. As noted above, Silvers rightly argues that praise for an occasional holy woman in a medieval text does nothing to modify one's general understanding of women ; such praise can actually accomplish the opposite. But praise for eighty-two holy women ? Does this amount of material force one to posit to al-Sulamī a different anthropology than one posits to his contemporaries ? From a historical perspective, *Dhikr al-niswa* describes Ṣūfī women visiting publicly and privately with men, attending mixed-gender gatherings, and in some cases acting in other socially unconventional ways. The marginal role Ṣūfī women play in texts from the period probably does not indicate their actual level of participation in pious and mystical circles. [46] To the contrary, one may justly speculate that al-Sulamī's insistence in his other writings that men should not enter into companionship with women likely indicates that at least some men were, in fact, doing this. But from the perspective of theological anthropology, the dilemma yet remains : al-Sulamī's corpus holds up a large number of women as spiritual masters, describes their companionship and social mixing with men and the benefits of this for both, while at the same time, al-Sulamī ostensibly discourages men from such relationships.

3 Aspects of *ṣuḥba* in al-Sulamī's thought

Al-Sulamī's treatment of cross-gender companionship depends upon his assumptions about *ṣuḥba* generally, but a full discussion of the nature of Ṣūfī companionship far

44. On the dating of the development of cross-gender companionship, see Melchert, "Before *ṣūfiyyāt*", p. 132.

45. Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Literature,* p. 109.

46. Silvers, "Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women", pp. 27-8.

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exceeds the bounds of the present essay.[47] Some summary comments will have to suffice. The term *ṣuḥba* is pregnant with meaning, evoking the relationship between the Prophet and his Companions, and thus figures heavily into al-Sulamī's discourse, as it did for many other Ṣūfī masters. The bond of companionship was a constitutive part of an aspirant's progress on the spiritual path ; even before the term evolved to refer primarily to the bond between shaykh and *murīd,* practitioners of *taṣawwuf* appreciated that interpersonal relationships provide the vehicle by which one acquires saving knowledge.

Al-Sulamī is not perfectly consistent in his use of terminology for interpersonal relationships, but one helpful distinction illuminates his discussion of Ṣūfī women. He distinguishes between companionship and fellowship, between *ṣuḥba* and *ᶜishra* or *muᶜāshara.* When he employs this distinction, it runs along two axes : the duration of the relationship described and the level of voluntary closeness in the relationship described. In a treatise on proper reverence for shaykhs, al-Sulamī writes, "It is obligatory for one to distinguish between fellowship (*ᶜishra*) and companionship (*ṣuḥba*), for fellowship is only temporary and companionship is enduring."[48] Other treatises, like *Kitāb ādāb al-ṣuḥba,* rely more heavily on the second axis, that of voluntary closeness. Here, *ṣuḥba* denotes a voluntary relationship founded on mutual religious commitment, the intentional decision to form and persist in a bond motivated by and sustained by religious commitment. *ᶜIshra,* by contrast, refers to the inescapable web of relationships that a person in society cannot avoid ; *ḥusn al-ᶜishra* denotes the good social mores that mark the behavior of believers in all their social dealings.[49] Al-Sulamī's use of these terms thus shifts their sense among linguists of the period. In classical dictionaries, the mixing denoted by the root *ᶜ-sh-r* often means life in the same tent and thus has a sense of constancy.[50] For al-Sulamī, the constancy in *ᶜishra* resides in the fact that no believer can escape embeddedness in society, the involuntary mixing that happens in the *sūq* ; this constancy does not reside in the

47. For more detailed discussion, see some of the fine essays in Gobillot and Thibon, *Les maîtres soufis et leurs disciples* ; or Welle, Jason, "Clarifying Companionship : Al-Sulamī's (d. 412/1021) *Kitāb ādāb al-ṣuḥba*", Ph.D., Georgetown University, 2016, chapters 4-5.

48. Al-Sulamī, *Adab mujālasat al-mashāyikh,* in *Majmūᶜa-i āthār Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī,* vol. 3, p. 112, #9.

49. Thibon, *L'œuvre d'Abū ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī*, pp. 259-62. With regard to *Kitāb ādāb al-ṣuḥba*, Thibon suggests that *ᶜishra* is a more nebulous term, denoting life in society in a more general way than the more structured, codified relationships implied by *ṣuḥba.* However, Thibon casts this difference as one of private/public rather than lasting/temporary. This is certainly true insofar as *ṣuḥba* denotes a more intense bond intentionally formed between two persons – in this sense it is private. But companions often manifest publically, among others who are not companions, the obligations and comportment that result from this private bond ; in this sense, Thibon's description of *ṣuḥba* as "private" could mislead.

50. Ibn Fāris' (d. 395/1004) *Maqāyīs* posits two major meanings in the root *ᶜ-sh-r,* the first relating to the number ten and the second to the notion of mixture or mingling. Al-Jawharī's (d. 397/1007 ?) *al-Ṣiḥāḥ* also associates *ᶜishra* with this meaning of mixing, equating *ᶜishra* with *mukhālaṭa* ; Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1312) retained this in *Lisān al-ᶜarab.* Other nouns based on this root denote relationships of tribe, clan, or marriage. *Lisān al-ᶜarab* at one point equates *ᶜashīr* with *qarīb* and *ṣadīq,* but clearly in the context of familial relationships, not in the more general sense of friendship. Elsewhere, *Lisān al-ᶜarab* complicates the matter by equating *ṣāḥib* with *muᶜāshir* without any explanatory distinction, as well as equating the third forms of these verbal roots (*ṣāḥaba* and *ᶜāshara*) with each other without any explanatory distinction. Ibn Manẓūr witnesses the voluntary nature of *ṣuḥba* in his discussion of the tenth verbal form from that root, *istaṣḥaba.* This verb means to call someone to *ṣuḥba* and all that is obligatory in that relationship. Ibn Fāris, Aḥmad al-Qazwīnī, *Muᶜjam maqāyīs al-lugha*, ᶜĪsā l-Bābī l-Ḥalabī, Cairo, 1946, vol. 4, pp. 324-7 ; al-Jawharī, Ismāᶜīl ibn Ḥammād, *al-Ṣiḥāḥ : Tāj al-lugha wa-ṣiḥāḥ al-ᶜarabiyya*, Dār al-ᶜIlm li-l-Milāyīn, Beirut, 1984, vol. 2, pp. 746-8 ; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ᶜarab,* Dār al-Maᶜārif, Cairo, 1900, vol. 4, pp. 2400-1, 2955.

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permanency of bonds with particular individuals, whether family or otherwise. *Ḥusn al-ᶜishra* denotes for him a believer's response, inspired and guided by the Prophet, to the daily goings-on of life, not to the bond of great intensity and intention denoted by *ṣuḥba.* Companionship, by contrast, results from serious discernment : one enters a mutual, voluntary, stable commitment with like-minded believers who excel in virtue and piety and who desire to spur each other on toward the good. [51]

One sees the importance of this distinction in al-Sulamī's rhetoric with regard to women. In *Kitāb ādāb al-ṣuḥba,* he never refers to companionship with women, but to fellowship (*ᶜishra*) and social relations (*muᶜāshara*) with them. This helps account for the harshness of his rhetoric with regard to women in that treatise ; the women mentioned are not spiritual elites, but fellow believers whose weakness men must suffer as a fact of life, references to wives or women within one's family. His citation of the *ḥadīth* likening a woman to a crooked rib indicates the prudent guidance al-Sulamī desires men to provide. Women have the capacity to lead men astray ; men must persevere in honorable behavior toward their wives, teaching them proper *adab* and directing them toward obedience to the Prophet's *sunna.*

Al-Sulamī derogates women in this way when he discusses fellowship with them, but his discussions of companionship with women do not generally contain such references to women's deficiency, perhaps because the women in question may be Ṣūfī adepts. Further, al-Sulamī's discouragement for companionship with women often does not clarify the modes of that companionship. In the case of certain outstanding women like Fāṭima of Nishapur (d. 223/838), we read that Dhū l-Nūn (d. 245/859 or 248/862) asked her opinion on doctrinal matters (*masā'il*) and that he called her his teacher (*ustādh/ustādha*). [52] Does this mean that these two, or other mixed-gender companions, enjoyed a relationship like that of a *shaykh al-taᶜlīm* and his student, or like a *shaykh al-tarbiya* and his *murīd* ? [53] Did these women receive the equivalent of spiritual direction from a male shaykh, or did *ṣuḥba* signify something else in a mixed-gender relationship ? The evidence is not clear.

51. Al-Sulamī, *Kitāb ādāb al-ṣuḥba,* pp. 30, 35.

52. A number of sources record Dhū l-Nūn's comment, but several render the comment using the feminine *ustādha.* Al-Sulamī and Ibn al-Jawzī have *ustādh,* consistent with a grammatical convention by which extraordinary Ṣūfī women essentially become men. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* pp. 142-5 ; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa,* Dār al-Maᶜrifa, Beirut, 1985, vol. 4, p. 124, #688 ; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Mukhtār min manāqib al-akhyār,* Markaz Zāyid l-il-Turāth wa-l-Tārīkh [Zayed Center for Heritage and History], Al Ain, United Arab Emirates, 2002, vol. 5, p. 275, #571 ; al-Manāwī, *al-Kawākib al-durriyya,* al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya lil-Turāth, Cairo, 1994, vol. 1, p. 474, #271 ; al-Shaᶜrānī, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā,* Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, Cairo, 2005, vol. 1, p. 122, #126 ; for discussion of such usage, see Silvers, "Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women", p. 47 ; Thibon, *L'œuvre d'Abū ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī*, p. 332fn287 ; al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* p. 45.

53. Roded rightly notes that in biographical dictionaries, Ṣūfī men asking women for advice often use the command, *ᶜiẓinī,* meaning, "provide [me] knowledge to induce correct behavior." Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Literature,* p. 104. For discussion of the evolution of the role of the shaykh in the formative period of Ṣūfism, see Meier, Fritz (1999), "Khurāsān and the End of Classical Sufism", *in* Meier, Fritz, *Essays on Islamic Piety and Mysticism,* Brill, Leiden, pp. 189-219 ; Silvers (2003), "The Teaching Relationship in Early Sufism : A Reassessment of Fritz Meier's Definition of the *shaykh al-tarbiya* and the *shaykh al-taᶜlīm*", *The Muslim World,* Vol. 93, No 1, pp. 69-97 ; see also contributions to Gobillot and Thibon, *Les maîtres soufis et leurs disciples.*

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4 The Dangers of *Niswān*

If al-Sulamī, at least in his apologetic treatises, is so keen to discourage cross-gender companionship, one must clarify who these potential companions were in order to understand the nature of the danger they posed. Cornell asserts that in *Dhikr al-niswa,* the word *niswān* functions as a technical term, indicating that these women practiced the female equivalent of male *futuwwa.*[54] From the late third/ninth century onward, a female ethic of chivalry developed and al-Sulamī uses the term *niswān* to impart corporate identity to its practitioners. Cornell does not suggest here that the *niswān* established confraternities equivalent to men's *futuwwa* organizations ; detailed evidence for the development of men's associations is scant and the evidence for women's chivalric groups is thinner still.[55] Whether one understands women's *futuwwa* as an informal association or as a constellation of character traits or virtues a believer attempts to cultivate, Cornell admits that we ultimately remain in the dark about the precise meaning of *niswān* for al-Sulamī and his contemporaries. She has no doubt, however, that al-Sulamī uses the term as a deliberate and evocative parallel to *fityān.*[56] A number of subsequent scholars have cited her claim with approval.[57] To anticipate my argument : the evidence indicating that al-Sulamī intends to use *niswān* as a technical term is not strong. While this is possible, it is far from clear. More likely, al-Sulamī uses the term as a functional synonym for "women" and does not invest it with special meaning ; this is but one of many cases where al-Sulamī lapses into lexical imprecision.[58]

Several points of data lean in favor of Cornell's assessment. First, Cornell's analysis of the morphology has merit. From the common noun for "women" (*nisā'*) proceeds a diminutive term that al-Sulamī uses positively, to indicate spiritual enhancement (*niswa*), and a special category of women named by a variation on this diminutive (*niswān*). Cornell highlights the parallels between these latter two forms and their masculine counterparts, *fitya* and *fityān.* Second, the word *niswān* is rare in the classical period, so its novelty lends credence to the notion that al-Sulamī would choose a rare term to invest it with special meaning. The term does not appear in the Qur'ān, nor in major *ḥadīth* collections like al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) or Muslim (d. 261/875).[59] It appears in a selection of poetry recorded by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā (d. 281/894), but this

54. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* pp. 66-9 ; for examples of the use of *niswān* in *Dhikr al-niswa,* see *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 110-11, 142-3, 168-9, 210-11, 214-15, 222-3, 238-9, 258-9.

55. Schimmel and Louis Massignon discuss female communities or confraternities similar to men's *futuwwa* organizations in a slightly later period. The development of *futuwwa* organizations in general remains a subject of great debate and we do not possess much reliable data for the fourth/tenth and early fifth/eleventh century. Schimmel, *L'islam au feminin,* p. 51.

56. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* p. 68.

57. Ridgeon, *Morals and Mysticism in Persian Sufism : A History of Sufi-Futuwwat in Iran*, Routledge, New York, 2010, pp. 33-5 ; Silvers, "Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women", p. 49. Prior to Melchert's more detailed refutation of Cornell's claim here, Thibon had been the only scholar (to my knowledge) to express reticence about this matter in print. Melchert, "Before *ṣūfiyyāt*", pp. 117-120 ; Thibon, *L'œuvre d'Abū ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī*, p. 336fn307.

58. One need not search long in order to find evidence of Giancarlo Rizzo's introductory comment that one better considers al-Sulamī a poet than a theoretician. Al-Sulamī, *Donne sûfî,* p. 14.

59. Wensinck only notes one instance of the term, in the introduction to Abū Dāwūd's *Sunan.* Wensinck, A.J., *et al.*, *Concordance et indices de la tradition Musulmane*, Brill, Leiden, 1967, vol. 6, p. 441.

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is for metrical and not technical purposes.[60] Third, some appearances of *niswān* in al-Sulamī's writings do suggest this connection. The most likely example is Amat al-ᶜAzīz, who was known as "one of the most altruistic practitioners of female chivalry in her day" (*min aftā waqtihā fī l-niswān*).[61] Here, the close proximity of the verbal root *f-t-w* to *niswān* suggests the notional connection Cornell sees between the *fityān* and the *niswān.* Another suggestive example is Fāṭima bint Aḥmad. The mother of Abū ᶜAbdullāh al-Rūdhbārī (d. 369/979) is described as being "one of the greatest practitioners of female chivalry and one of the gnostics" (*min kibār al-niswān wa-min al-ᶜārifāt*).[62] One could also point to Umm al-Ḥusayn bint Aḥmad ibn Ḥamdān (fl. mid-4th/10th C.), who had a companion among the practitioners of female chivalry (*baᶜḍ man saḥibathā min al-niswān*).[63] In none of these cases does the grammar demand that one understand *niswān* to denote something more precise than simply "women," but each suggests that the term has a special character.

Other appearances of the term *niswān* in *Dhikr al-niswa* suggest the opposite. ᶜAthama bint Bilāl ibn Abū l-Dardā' (fl. early 2nd/8th C.) was "one of the vigorous worshippers among the women" (*min mutaᶜabbidāt al-niswān*).[64] Grammatically, the presence of the construct state (the absence of the definite article *al-* for *mutaᶜabbidāt*) indicates that vigorous worshippers were a smaller group among a larger group : women. ᶜAthama also lived decades before the period in which the female version of *futuwwa* supposedly developed. If al-Sulamī intended to use *niswān* as a technical term, his attribution of it to ᶜAthama retrojects a later development onto an earlier period and singles her out among her contemporaries as a practitioner of it.[65] Al-Sulamī elsewhere does engage in such retrojection, including the term *ṣūfī* itself, but normally does so in an effort to emphasize continuity, not in a situation like ᶜAthama's that isolates the person so described. Another ambiguous example is Umm ᶜAlī Fāṭima (fl. mid-3rd/9th C.). The wife of Aḥmad ibn Khaḍrawayh of Balkh (d. 240/854), she had been a companion of Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 261/874–5 or 234/848–9).[66] Cornell translates :

60. Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, *Makārim al-akhlāq,* Maktabat al-Qur'ān, Cairo, 1990, p. 134, #441 ; *Qadā' al-ḥawā'ij,* Mu'assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyya, Beirut, 1993, p. 59, #69 ; *Iṣṭināᶜal-maᶜrūf,* Dār Ibn Ḥazm, Beirut, 2002, p. 103, #127.

61. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* pp. 222-3.

62. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* pp. 214-15, translation modified. Here, the parallel structure could indicate that both *niswān* and *ᶜārifāt* indicate particular classes of people, though this would be clearer if the text read *min kibār al-niswān wa-l-ᶜārifāt.*

63. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* pp. 238-9.

64. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* pp. 110-11. I commend here Silvers' translation of *mutaᶜabbidāt* as "vigorous worshippers" ; this captures the zeal and fervor of the ascetic and devotional practices that characterizes many of these women. Silvers, "Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women," p. 26.

65. Cornell assumes that al-Sulamī has projected a later institution backward in time and that one must assume the absence of organized women's *futuwwa* groups during ᶜAthama's life. ᶜAthama embodied the ethic associated with these later groups and al-Sulamī thus describes her accordingly. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* p. 68.

66. Al-Sulamī merely reports that she met (*laqiyat*) al-Biṣṭāmī and that she asked him about doctrinal matters (*saᶜalat. . . ᶜan masā'il*), but al-Hujwirī offers more detail about this relationship. He says that both Fāṭima and her husband Aḥmad were acquainted with al-Biṣṭāmī and that she would come with her husband on visits to see him. Aḥmad once became astonished when Fāṭima appeared before al-Biṣṭāmī unveiled, an act she explained by saying that she was Aḥmad's spouse according to nature but al-Biṣṭāmī's according to their *ṭarīqa.* The text twice refers to the *ṣuḥba* between her and al-Biṣṭāmī. That bond of companionship ended when al-Biṣṭāmī's eye alighted on her henna-painted hand and she thus deemed the companionship between them unlawful. Al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb,* Zhukovskiĭ, Valentin Alekseyevich (ed.), Amīr-i Kabīr, Tehran, 1957, pp. 149-50 ; translated by Reynold A. Nicholson as *The Kashf Al-Mahjub : A Persian Treatise on Sufism,* Brill, Leiden, 1911, pp. 120-1.

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It was reported that Abū Ḥafṣ [al-Ḥaddād of Nishapur] said : "I used to dislike stories about the practitioners of female chivalry [*mā ziltu akrahu ḥadīth al-niswān*] until I met Umm ᶜAlī, the wife of Aḥmad ibn Khaḍrawayh. Then I learned that God Most High bestows His knowledge on whomever He wishes."[67]

One could read the text a number of ways : Abū Ḥafṣ (d. ca. 270/883) disliked speaking to women, disliked speaking to practitioners of female chivalry, disliked stories about women, etc. Abū Ḥafṣ was known to value *futuwwa* and debate its meaning with the shaykhs of Baghdad.[68] With this in mind, is it more likely that he had disregarded women in general and came to acknowledge their potential through the example of Umm ᶜAlī, or that he possessed a specific distaste for women associated with spiritual chivalry but came to value their practice of it ? The latter is possible, but far from certain. More likely, *niswān* here simply means "women."[69]

None of the appearances of *niswān* in *Dhikr al-niswa* discussed thus far are unambiguous, but two final examples provide the real impetus for the discussion at hand. Al-Sulamī transmits two anecdotes in which male Ṣūfīs resist receiving gifts from women (*niswān*). In both cases, these Ṣūfī women, Fāṭima of Nishapur and ᶜĀ'isha bint Aḥmad al-Ṭawīl al-Marwaziyya (fl. late $4^{th}/10^{th}$ C.), rebuke the men for the error of their ways.[70] The phrase *qubūl arfāq al-niswān,* appearing in each of these passages, provides the link to the way al-Sulamī speaks about women in several other places in his corpus. In at least seven other texts, al-Sulamī baldly states that Ṣūfism involves avoiding companionship with women. In these passages, any supposed distinction between *nisā'* and *niswān* erodes : in one place, he describes *arfāq al-niswān* as a vice,[71] while in another, he discourages *arfāq al-nisā'.*[72] We have no reason here to posit a technical term for female chivalry ; based on nearly identical phrases elsewhere in al-Sulamī's writings, we should assume the opposite.[73] Beyond this, al-Sulamī urges believers in one place to forsake companionship with *niswān*,[74] and elsewhere, to avoid friendship and fellowship with *niswān*,[75] and still elsewhere, to keep distant from friendship with *niswān.*[76] Al-Sulamī reports that he heard his teacher Abū l-Qāsim al-Naṣrābādhī (d. 367/977-8) respond sharply to someone who claimed he could attend women's sessions (*yujālis al-niswān*) without falling into sin. Al-Naṣrābādhī

67. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* pp. 168-9.

68. Al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya,* Shurayba, Nūr al-Dīn (ed.), Maktabat al-Khānijī, Cairo, 1969, pp. 117-18, #9-10, see also #11 ; *Les générations des Soufis,* pp. 110-111.

69. Thibon, *L'œuvre d'Abū ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī*, p. 336fn307.

70. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* pp. 142-3, 258-9.

71. Al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya,* p. 190, #22 ; *Les générations des Soufis,* p. 158.

72. In the same paragraph, al-Sulamī stresses that one's service to one's *brothers* should be generous, by means of *arfāq.* Al-Sulamī, *Sulūk al-ᶜārifīn,* in *Majmūᶜa-i āthār Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī,* vol. 3, p. 575, #24.

73. See, for example, the saying attributed to Muẓaffar al-Qirmīsīnī (fl. $4^{th}/10^{th}$ C.) in al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya,* p. 396, #6 ; *Les générations des Soufis,* p. 306.

74. Al-Sulamī, *Kitāb maḥāsin al-taṣawwuf,* in *Majmūᶜa-i āthār Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī,* vol. 3, p. 136, #7.

75. Al-Sulamī, *Mas'ala fī qawā'id al-taṣawwuf wa mabānīhā,* in *Sufi Inquiries and Interpretations of Abū ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī and A Treatise of Traditions by Ismā'īl b. Nujayd al-Naysābūrī (Masā'il wa ta'wīlāt ṣūfiyya li-Abī ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī wa yalīhi Juz' min aḥādīth Ismāᶜīl ibn Nujayd al-Naysābūrī),* Böwering, Gerhard ; Orfali, Bilal (eds.) Dār al-Mashriq, Beirut, 2010, p. 9, #41.

76. Kohlberg, Etan (1979), "*Manāhij al-ᶜārifīn,* a Treatise on Ṣūfism by Abū ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam,* Vol. 1, p. 38, #16 ; Arabic text of treatise reprinted in *Majmūᶜa-i āthār Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī,* vol. 2, pp. 133-58.

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saw this act as forbidden and that someone bold enough to try it resists God's commands and prohibitions.[77] In the most sweeping and comprehensive statement of the dangers women pose, al-Sulamī urges believers to avoid friendship with women, to keep away from their fellowship and companionship, and to avoid any discourse with them : *yajtanib arfāq al-niswān wa-yabᶜud ᶜan ᶜishratihinna wa-ṣuḥbatihinna wa-kalām ᶜalayhinna wa-maᶜahunna.*[78] In context, such a comment cannot merely prohibit formal companionship between male Ṣūfī adepts and female Ṣūfī adepts : it is a more comprehensive caution about the perils of friendly relations with women. It could be the case that in these texts speaking about *niswān,* al-Sulamī exhorts Ṣūfī men to avoid the companionship of pious women who have dedicated themselves to cultivating the virtues of female chivalry, but it seems more likely that *niswān* functions simply as a synonym for women and that al-Sulamī discourages social mixing with them. *Niswān* certainly means nothing more than "women" in *Kitāb ādāb al-ṣuḥba,* where al-Sulamī's reference to *ādāb al-ᶜishra maᶜa l-niswān wa-l-ahl* describes women's deficiency in intellect and religion and men's obligations to deal honorably with them in view of this.[79] In sum, if Cornell is correct about al-Sulamī's usage in *Dhikr al-niswa* – and I have suggested here that *Dhikr al-niswa* is ambiguous – one must deal with usage in the rest of al-Sulamī's literary corpus inconsistent with Cornell's hypothesis.

5 The Spiritual Progress of Ṣūfī Women

I have reflected at length on the data about cross-gender companionship because scholars of Ṣūfism know that in the formative period, interpersonal relationships between believers were a crucial instrument to achieve spiritual growth.[80] Many early Ṣūfī masters saw companionship as a *sine qua non* for progress on the path,[81] which demonstrates the relevance of the nature of both cross-gender companionship and same-gender companionship for women's spiritual progress. But to return now to my primary inquiry : al-Sulamī positively recognizes the spiritual potential of women in a way that many others of his day could not, while at the same time, he retains most of the assumptions of his day regarding women's deficiency. How does a woman get across the "gap" and join the spiritual elites ?[82] Cornell suggests that these women

77. Al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya,* p. 487, #10 ; *Les générations des Soufis,* p. 373 ; Ibn ᶜAsākir transmits a slight difference in the form of one verb ; this could reflect a variant in the now-lost *Tārīkh al-ṣūfiyya* but does not change the frankness of al-Sulamī's master on this point. *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq,* Dār al-Fikr, Beirut, 1995, vol. 7, p. 107.

78. Al-Sulamī, *Bayān tadhallul al-fuqarā',* p. 60, #44.

79. Al-Sulamī, *Kitāb ādāb al-ṣuḥba,* p. 51.

80. Whether or not one accepts Émile Durkheim's famous maxim that "Religion is an eminently social thing," one can certainly say that in the formative period of *taṣawwuf,* "Ṣūfism is an eminently social thing." Durkheim, Emile, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Free Press, New York, 1995, p. 9 ; Hofer, Nathan C., *The Popularisation of Sufism in Ayyubid and Mamluk Egypt, 1173-1325*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2015, p. 5.

81. An oft-cited maxim with a number of variants sums up this assumption. Al-Qushayrī attributes it to Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī : "If someone does not have a shaykh, then Satan is his shaykh." Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-qushayriyya fī ᶜilm al-taṣawwuf*, Abū Sahl Najāḥ ʿAwaḍ Ṣiyām (ed.), Dār al-Muqaṭṭam, Cairo, 2009, p. 523 ; translated by Alexander Knysh as *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism : Al-Risala al-qushayriyya fi ᶜilm al-tasawwuf*, Garnet, Reading, 2007, pp. 405-6.

82. One might evade this quandary by assuming that the mystical life involves a sharp contrast with the natural state of things, but unless one attributes mystical experience solely and exclusively to divine initiative and power, this evades the practical question about the concrete steps a person can or must take to overcome a natural deficiency. Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Literature,* p. 104.

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did embrace a distinctive spiritual path. She describes it as a "theology of servitude," a "practice-oriented complement to the more theoretical doctrines followed by Sufi men."[83] What makes Ṣūfī women different is their practice of *taᶜabbud,* literally, "making oneself a slave." The root concept of *ᶜibāda* is shared by men and women, of course : the theology of servitude finds expression throughout the Qur'ān and the *sunna.* It finds distinctive expression in these women because by making a special spiritual vocation out of service to their divine Master, women could free themselves from the constraints that would normally have limited their role in society. They could separate themselves from ordinary women who were not called to an "independent life as 'career women' of the spirit."[84] The devotion of these women to prayer predominates : extreme stories of their dedication to fervent prayer recur again and again.[85] Poverty also characterizes the path of the women in *Dhikr al-niswa*, not merely in the sense of voluntary denial of worldly goods, but in an emphasis on complete reliance on God. The spiritual method of this theology of servitude works on the outer and inner natures of the human being at the same time, the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin*, and enables a woman to cultivate the attributes that free her from the *nafs,* the ego-self. For Cornell, *Dhikr al-niswa* implies that once women begin practicing the theology of servitude, male authority figures can no longer claim that these women are deficient in religion because servitude is the truest form of submission to God.

I have summarized Cornell's assessment here at some length, because it remains the predominant hypothesis for a distinctive spiritual path for Ṣūfī women and a number of scholars cite it with approval.[86] Aside from the question of whether a "theology of servitude" captures a gendered difference in the spiritual life, distinguishing these women from male Ṣūfīs, one can yet ask first whether this phrase adequately characterizes the women in *Dhikr al-niswa.* The most suggestive datum for this moniker of servitude comes in the title of al-Sulamī's biographical dictionary, *Dhikr al-niswa al-mutaᶜabbidāt al-ṣūfiyyāt. Mutaᶜabbidāt* here obviously suggests that the women described are examples of *taᶜabbud,* but the text contains no introduction or conclusion to flesh out what *taᶜabbud* means and one has reason to doubt whether al-Sulamī himself ascribed this title to the book.[87] In the individual entries, only seven of the eighty-two women are directly described as *mutaᶜabbida.* Al-Sulamī records elsewhere many examples of masters being asked to define Ṣūfism or spiritual chivalry (*mā l-taṣawwuf ? mā l-futuwwa ?*), but none of the entries in *Dhikr al-niswa* contains a definition of *taᶜabbud.*[88] References to *ᶜubūdiyya* (servanthood) are also few, and while a quarter of the entries in *Dhikr al-niswa* contain some use of the root *ᶜ-b-d,* this

83. Cornell, "Sufi Women's Spirituality", p. 167.

84. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* p. 57.

85. Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Literature,* p. 94.

86. Some scholars qualify it, as does Silvers, who notes that one cannot make a confident historical judgment about whether this theology of servitude reflects the attitudes of these women or the attitudes of the men who transmitted their teachings. Silvers, "Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women", p. 29 ; Silvers, "God Loves Me", pp. 33-5.

87. More likely, the text now known as *Dhikr al-niswa* was once a section of the now-lost *Tārīkh al-ṣūfiyya* ; this explains the lack of an introduction or conclusion. Melchert, "Before *ṣūfiyyāt*", p. 118.

88. For just two examples, see al-Sulamī, *Kitāb al-futuwwa / Tasavvufta fütüvvet*, Ateş, Süleyman (ed. and trans.), Ankara Üniversitesi İlâhiyat Fakültesi Yayınları, Ankara, 1977, p. 89, reprinted in *Majmūᶜa-i āthār Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī,* vol. 2, p. 351 ; al-Sulamī, *Mā l-taṣawwuf wa-man al-ṣūfī ?,* in *Majmūᶜa-i āthār Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī,* vol. 3, p. 327, #1. To be clear, such aphorisms are not "definitions" in the restrictive sense of the word ; rather, they are attempts to grasp different aspects of

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cannot be significant, due to the ubiquity of the term *ᶜabd* in al-Sulamī's other texts, including *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya. Taᶜabbud* on its own is not the core concept running through the little data we have about these Ṣūfī women.

Unfortunately, other possible alternatives in that biographical dictionary show little more promise. In search of a gendered difference in the Ṣūfī path, I examined several themes that recur frequently in *Dhikr al-niswa,* then looked back at *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* to examine their frequency in al-Sulamī's biographical dictionary of Ṣūfī men. [89] "Love" stands as the strongest candidate for a theme marking the spirituality of these Ṣūfī women. Especially if one includes *uns* as an expression of intimacy in addition to *ḥubb* and *maḥabba,* no less than twenty-four entries in *Dhikr al-niswa* speak about a Ṣūfī woman's love for God. Several of these include discussion of fear of God and indicate the transition from ascetical piety to mystical piety. Without doubt, one can say that intimacy with God – the experience of closeness to God and the assumption that God accepts their deeds – characterizes these women's relationship to God. This does not serve, however, as a mark that distinguishes Ṣūfī women from Ṣūfī men. Love is a theme throughout *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* as well, and although one must account for the much greater length of *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* when comparing it to *Dhikr al-niswa,* the relative density of sayings about love in *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* prevents one from identifying love as a characteristic that distinguishes female Ṣūfī piety from male Ṣūfī piety.

Another candidate for a distinguishing mark could be *mujāhada/ijtihād.* These terms for spiritual exercises or striving are used thirteen times in *Dhikr al-niswa* and when they appear they are significant : they refer to specific acts of spiritual discipline. These terms appear with greater relative frequency in *Dhikr al-niswa* than they do in *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya.* Unfortunately, their relative frequency in *Dhikr al-niswa* itself is not sufficiently high ; when less than one-sixth of the entries in *Dhikr al-niswa* mention *mujāhada,* we cannot identify spiritual striving as the predominant characteristic which links these women together.

As already mentioned, a feminine version of *futuwwa* cannot serve as a distinguishing mark. Even if the term *niswān* implies commitment to female chivalry, the number of women so designated is not large and the data is ambiguous. While one cannot expect to find a golden thread running through the teachings of each and every Ṣūfī woman, I cannot find an alternative to "servitude" that adequately captures the core insights of a critical mass of these women. Their teachings, as they survive, are too disparate and cannot seem to make the dots connect.

One could augment Cornell's insight about a theology of servitude by drawing in more robustly the notion of *khidma.* Here, one English moniker, "servitude," can gather two rich Arabic terms, *taᶜabbud* and *khidma*, as complementary expressions of service.

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this experience and practice. Frank, Tamar (1984), "'*Taṣawwuf* is…' : On a Type of Mystical Aphorism," *Journal of the American Oriental Society,* Vol. 104, No 1, p. 73.

89. As one would expect in a text that is much longer, most of the laudable characteristics of the women remembered in *Dhikr al-niswa* appear in *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya.* Some of the key themes in *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* are not prominent with regard to women. *Adab* and *akhlāq* are two examples of terms that show up again and again in *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, including in al-Sulamī's introduction. The sayings he attributes to these women rarely invoke these terms.

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Cornell acknowledges that *khidma* is an essential aspect of *futuwwa* and *taᶜabbud* and rightly associates this type of service with women who appear in the second half of al-Sulamī's biographical dictionary.[90] The addition of *khidma* also offers a clear distinction between Ṣūfī women and Ṣūfī men.[91] *Khidma* appears in a quarter of the entries in *Dhikr al-niswa,* whereas the men in *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* speak about *khidma* rarely. Elsewhere in al-Sulamī's corpus, the only treatise in which the theme of *khidma* features prominently with regard to Ṣūfī men is *Adab mujālasat al-mashāyikh wa-ḥifẓ ḥurumātihim,* a text treating novices' obligation to serve shaykhs and show reverence for them. One can thus say that, for al-Sulamī's oeuvre on the whole, *khidma* constitutes a candidate to distinguish female Ṣūfī piety from male Ṣūfī piety, but this candidate raises additional problems. Believers normally perform *khidma* for a person, not for God, and Cornell stresses that *taᶜabbud* means selling oneself to God, serving God rather than persons. In theory, the two are not mutually exclusive ; al-Sulamī's treatment of service to shaykhs and reverence for them shows that he understands this service to shaykhs as a proxy for the service and reverence a believer owes to God. Still, Cornell frames her theology of servitude precisely as a means by which Ṣūfī women escaped some of the social constraints of their day. Her assessment here is historically correct in many cases : a good number of these women lived alone and their habits of piety bear out Cornell's description of them as "career women of the spirit." Stressing *khidma* as a core element of the theology of servitude rubs against this vision of servitude to God. Based on the sayings transmitted in *Dhikr al-niswa,* a significant number of the women described saw service to other people – whether their husbands, their families, shaykhs, or others – as an integral component of their Ṣūfī practice. For other Ṣūfī women – another significant number – such service was not part of their practice or was resented by these women when their circumstances demanded it.[92] *Khidma* thus stands as a distinguishing feature of the piety of many Ṣūfī women, but risks annulling some of the primary features Cornell attributes to the theology of servitude.

In my assessment, "theology of servitude" remains the least inadequate descriptor for the spiritual path of these women, provided one recalls the broad scope of behaviors encompassed by "servitude." These vigorous worshippers included lifelong celibates who lived alone, embracing spiritual disciplines and exercises as a liberating alternative to the domestic life their society expected of them. These vigorous worshippers also included women who served their families and male spiritual companions in countless mundane and practical ways, understanding this service as an integral and indispensible part of their worship of God. The contours of this theology of servitude varied greatly depending on the time period and geographical location, an evolution Cornell, Silvers and Christopher Melchert have already described as adequately as the scant data permits. A reexamination of *Dhikr al-niswa* neither presents an unambiguous way to articulate a gendered difference between male Ṣūfism and female Ṣūfism nor a clear set of concrete practices women used to overcome their supposed weakness

90. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* p. 67.

91. Melchert, "Before *ṣūfiyyāt*", p. 131.

92. Nusiyya bint Salmān (fl. late 2nd/early 9th C.) desired nothing other than service (*khidma*) to God but lamented the fact that God prevented this by busying her with a child. Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women,* pp. 92-3.

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and deficiency. Based on the diversity of these women's experiences, one struggles to locate a shared current in the way these spiritual masters, when they were yet aspirants, successfully managed to mind the gap and achieve the progress by which they earned their reputations.

6 Conclusion

I did not attempt at the outset of this study to articulate an essentialized, reified "women's spirituality" that would characterize Ṣūfī women over a period of many centuries. I have attempted, rather, to find some common themes or practices that generally distinguish early Ṣūfī women from the Ṣūfī men in their societies and enabled them to overcome what al-Sulamī sees as a serious spiritual impediment : simply being women. Finding these distinguishing marks has been difficult. With the exception of *khidma,* the other characteristics or virtues of the women described in *Dhikr al-niswa* do not differ in kind from their male counterparts ; they only differ in degree. The search also suffers from a paucity of data. The brevity of entries in *Dhikr al-niswa* inhibits any attempt to identify distinctively feminine aspects of the teachings transmitted and al-Sulamī does not seem to use a specifically feminine lexicon. [93] One can only wonder whether such a feminine lexicon existed but has been lost due to the transmission of these women's teachings by men. As it stands, *Dhikr al-niswa* provides no evidence that women pass through the stations of the mystical path – the *maqāmāt* – in a different sequence than men. Al-Sulamī's biographical dictionary doubtlessly reveals the high regard for these Ṣūfī women in the eyes of some of the great male Ṣūfī masters, but beyond our ability to generally affirm their embrace of the theology of servitude, the path these women used to reach their spiritual heights largely remains, as Cornell has rightly called it, a "veiled tradition." [94]

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93. Thibon, *L'œuvre d'Abū ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī*, pp. 332, 339.
94. Cornell, *Early Sufi Women,* p. 15.

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