

# Re-reading the Position of Women in Islamic-Iranian Mystical Texts (With Reference to Attar and Rumi's Works)

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## Abstract

Contrary to the traditional disciple-making efforts presented by commentators of mystical works, which aim to consolidate a fanatical attitude towards mysticism and hide any epistemological defects, these works have their own disadvantages, similar to any other knowledge system. One of these disadvantages is the categorization of "women," which, due to the continuation of the patriarchal worldview and the Mithraic origin of Iranian-Islamic mysticism, has been approached with a dogmatic and gender-oriented perspective. Therefore, within the mystical tradition, despite occasional praises given to women in Sufi works, they are generally regarded as symbols of evil passion, and the love for them is seen as figurative and lustful. In these instances, the mystical texts acknowledge their own stance, and, often in contrast to the efforts of their fanatical admirers, provide an opportunity for so-called "destructive" analyses. The present article examines the contradictions within the works of two renowned mystical poets, Attar and Rumi, specifically regarding their portrayal of "woman". By adopting a deconstructive approach, often utilizing textual evidence, it aims to highlight their patriarchal attitude. Consequently, it concludes that while researchers of mystical works have often attempted to absolve the mystic poets of their patriarchal or misogynistic gender-oriented views, the mystics themselves have not done so.

## Keywords

Islamic-Iranian Mysticism; Mystical Texts; Women; Attar; Rumi.

## 1. Introduction

The persistence of a worldview can be considered one of the most enduring concepts in the history of human beliefs. As it is sometimes observed, religions and schools of thought undergo changes and give way to newer religions and schools. Nevertheless, these structural changes occur within the framework of a specific worldview, where the belief systems of a particular religion or school have developed and remained unchanged. The patriarchal worldview is a prime example of such enduring beliefs, rooted in the dominance of masculine perspectives and values in human society. Despite the emergence of new religions and significant cultural shifts, this patriarchal ethos has persisted as the unquestioned mindset, evident across various religions and schools of thought. Its entrenched position in the human consciousness has made it the foundation and origin of numerous religious and philosophical traditions.

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Islamic mysticism is a school that emerged within Islamic society twelve centuries ago. It crafted its own unique language and integrated it into the daily lives of people. This tradition, with over twelve centuries of existence in Islamic society, has significantly influenced various aspects of people's lives, including livelihood, worship, prayer, behavior, economy, travel, and even clothing. It also outlines its guidelines for the role of women within the family, community, and monastery. Despite variations in the experiences and upbringings of individuals, which may sometimes manifest in the tone and writings of mystics, these guidelines share a common origin rooted in a patriarchal framework that underpins the development and evolution of mysticism (Taheri 27). Therefore, mysticism must be defined within the context of this patriarchal worldview, which has shaped both the ancient and universal human perspective.

One of the religions that originated in the same region, with evidence of its presence in the beliefs of people dating back to 1200 BC, is the Mithraic religion (Pourdavoud 117, Vermaseren 15). It held certain beliefs and principles, such as enduring suffering and avoiding pleasure as a means to detach from the material world. In the Mithraic religion, women were viewed as representing earthly pleasure and were seen as hindrances to men's spiritual progress. Consequently, the Mithraic religion developed a strong misogynistic perspective (Vermaseren 2004, 200). Elements and principles of the Mithraic religion persisted even after the advent of Islam, particularly within the framework of Islamic mysticism. One of the most apparent legacies of this influence can be observed in its perspective towards women.

It is worth mentioning that modern scholars, including some who are women, have expressed views on the attitudes of poet-mystics towards women that often exceed the realities presented in these poets' works. While mystic poets like Attar and Rumi have indeed illuminated the world of literature and crafted literary masterpieces, it does not necessarily imply that they were pioneers of positive change in their era or made specific efforts to improve society's perception of women. From their writings, it becomes evident that, in their perspective, women were neither regarded as equals to men nor did they enjoy the same rights as men.

Contrary to most previous research, this article approaches the topic in a deconstructive manner, drawing on the perspectives of two prominent mystical poets who hold a significant position in Islamic literature and mysticism. Their works have been translated into various languages and are well-known among scholars, professors, and even the general public. The two poets in focus are Attar Neishabouri, a sage, poet, and writer from the 12th century, and Jalaluddin Maulawi, also known as Rumi, a sage, poet, and writer from the 13th century. The article aims to address the following question:

How can another possibility be offered for a different interpretation and critique of the one-sided and unrealistic attitude and approach of mysticism's enthusiasts and fanatics? This aims to foster a more rational approach and research-oriented perspective, while acknowledging their emotional tendencies and prescriptive views. This can be achieved by paying close attention to the origins and foundations of most mystical beliefs in general, and delving into the texts of Rumi and Attar's mystical works in particular.

## 2. Literature Review

Many books and papers have been written about the role of women in mysticism in general, with a particular focus on mystical works like Rumi's "*Mathnawi*." However, citing and critiquing each of these works at length would unnecessarily extend this paper. A common shortcoming among these research works is that the authors themselves are often mystics and enthusiasts of Persian literature, leading to inherent bias in their writings. As they typically lay the foundation for preserving and celebrating the richness of mysticism as a vital part of Islamic-Iranian heritage, they may feel obligated to defend, gloss over, or justify its flaws. Consequently, their assessments of the achievements of mysticism and the analysis of the characteristics of mystics may not be entirely impartial.

The same applies to the mystics themselves in these writings. Apart from being revered as saints, mystics like Rumi also hold a prominent position as eloquent and articulate poets, making them central figures in Persian literature. This stature often deters anyone from critiquing their specific thoughts or perspectives on the subject of women. Many scholars, such as Imami (2009), who delve into women in Rumi's works, tend to structure their writings to confirm the results they anticipate, ultimately leading to a favorable portrayal of Rumi's viewpoint on women. Consequently, these writings appear quite similar and follow a predetermined trajectory. They build their arguments based on the texts and contexts in which women are praised while conveniently sidestepping instances where Rumi portrays women in a negative light. When they encounter verses that seem to demonize women, they either attribute it to a character within the narrative or connect it to the cultural context of Iran, which predates Rumi and continues beyond his time. In this manner, they absolve him of any wrongdoing, considering him merely an innocent narrator (Schimmel 104).

By citing two verses from the *Mathnawi* (Rumi 1926, 409), some argue that Rumi used these stories as a means to convey didactic themes to his disciples. According to this perspective, the intention was for readers to extract the moral of the story and engage in discussions about the various elements and concepts within the story, including Rumi's attitude towards women. This justification allows them to avoid critiquing Rumi's stance on women, even though instances of such attitudes are evident in works like Zarrinkoob's. In a separate book focused solely on the presence of women in Islamic

mysticism, Taheri (2007) presents reliable data and accurate analyses regarding women's role within mysticism. However, the outcomes align with those of other studies, giving the impression that she may not have been willing to express a different viewpoint. This limitation is a common feature in the literature addressing the study of women within the works and ideas of mystics.

However, this article takes a non-biased and non-prescriptive approach, using a deconstructive method and drawing from the works of two of the most renowned Iranian mystical poets, Rumi and Attar. It aims to offer a different perspective on the issue of women. By highlighting some of the most prominent contradictions within these texts, this interpretation serves as a critique of those individuals who, driven by an exaggerated love for mysticism, have arrived at one-sided, emotional, and unrealistic conclusions with a sanctity-oriented approach.

### **3. General Overview of the Research**

#### **3.1. Continuity of the Patriarchal Worldview from Mithraic Religion to Mystical Works**

The Mithraic religion stands as an ancient, enigmatic, and pre-Zoroastrian faith that has significantly shaped the worldview of people across vast regions of the world for millennia. Although the emergence of Zoroastrianism rendered the Mithraic religion obsolete, its enduring presence and global influence led to the transfer of Mithraic principles to subsequent religions and philosophical schools. Mysticism, notably, was one such school profoundly impacted by Mithraism<sup>i</sup>.

Mithraism is often regarded as a patriarchal religion, primarily because the surviving documents related to this faith exclusively mention men performing its rituals, with no reference to women. Furthermore, the religious mysteries of Mithraism were exclusively imparted to men, while women were not considered participants in these mysteries (Vermaseren 200). According to Tertullian, a Roman historian from the third century AD, adherents of Mithraism, both men and women, adhered to an ancient tradition of abstinence from courtship and sexual intercourse. Consequently, followers of this religion intentionally refrained from entering into marriage (Vermaseren 201)<sup>ii</sup>.

When scholars of mysticism discuss the influence of various religions and schools, such as Christianity, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Neo-Platonism, Sabianism, and others, they often overlook Mithraism, which is a matter worthy of questioning. For instance, Zarrinkoob has explored the parallels between mysticism and the Yarsan religion, a remnant of the ancient Mithraic faith (Zarrinkoob 1965, 118-119), while Razi, in his research, briefly examined "some of the effects of the Mithraic religion on Persian literature and mysticism" (2002, 576). Nevertheless, these two researchers primarily focused on the similarities between Mithraism and mysticism or the influence of Mithraism on mysticism, rather than delving into the Mithraic origins of mysticism.

Contrary to popular belief regarding the elements of Mithraism, this paper argues that Islamic mysticism has inherited its principles from Mithraic origins, albeit adapting them under the cloak of Islam to persist beyond the Islamic era. The founders of mysticism, aided by the Quran and Hadith, undertook a process of Islamicization. The features and similarities, the most significant of which will be briefly discussed, are so numerous and fundamental in this context that they cannot be dismissed as mere coincidence, as we will demonstrate below:

-Mithraic spiritual progress comprises seven stages, which align with the seven stages defining Islamic mysticism, starting from 'the urge to seek God' as the initial stage and culminating in complete annihilation.

-Monasticism is a key element in Mithraic spiritual progress and has parallels in the spiritual progress of Islamic mysticism.

-Due to monasticism, Mithraism's adherents practiced their traditions in caves. Similarly, Sufi texts contain numerous stories of mystics undergoing forty-day spiritual retreats in secluded caves, a practice also observed by Sufi Muslims.

-In both Mithraic mysticism and Islamic mysticism, asceticism is defined as renouncing worldly pleasures, both permissible and impermissible.

-In Mithraic mysticism, the elder spiritual guide embodies Mehr (Mithra), while in Islamic mysticism, the embodiment of God serves as the elder spiritual guide. Although scholars of mysticism seek to differentiate these embodiments from incarnation and reincarnation in their explanations, in practice, their natures share similarities, albeit expressed with different terminology.

-Both Mithraic spiritual progress and Islamic mysticism emphasize absolute allegiance and unquestioned obedience to the elder as a fundamental principle.

-A Mithraic spiritual guide would wear a dark blue dervish robe as a symbol of mourning, signifying detachment from the material world. This concept evolved in Islamic mysticism as well, reflected in phrases like 'tattered dark blue robe' in Persian literature, especially in the poems of Hafez, as remnants of this influence.

-In both religions, the spiritual guide is obliged to safeguard the secrets of their faith and refrain from disclosing them to others, including women.

There are additional items to consider for this list, including Sufi apothegms, interpretive approaches to scriptures, the use of the term 'soul brother' for Mithraic neophytes, and the use of 'Akhi' (meaning 'my new brother') among Anatolian Sufis. Also worth exploring are beliefs concerning heaven and hell, the impact of Mithraean dance on Sufi sama within sanctuaries, and the significance of animals like roosters. A comprehensive discussion of these topics could serve as the subject of future research.

In general, this paper suggests that the critical view of Islamic mysticism towards women can be traced back to its roots and origins. Just as in Mithraism, women were often regarded as inferior to men, leading mystics to maintain a certain distance from them within Islamic mysticism. The shared treatment of women serves as evidence of the Mithraic influence on Islamic mysticism. By tracing the historical evolution of mysticism back to its origins in the Mithraic religion, we can gain a deeper understanding of the philosophy behind these perspectives and the role of women within the belief system of Muslim mystics.

### **3.2. Women and Virtual Love: The Counterbalance to Mystical Austerity**

One of the most captivating themes within mystical literary texts revolves around the dialectical interplay of "austerity/virtual love/true love," where virtual love often stands in contrast to the concept of love for women. This juxtaposition is set against the backdrop of "austerity and suffering," and, according to mystical texts, the outcome or synthesis of this juxtaposition is referred to as truth or true love.

Mysticism is a discipline rooted in suffering; from its inception, enduring suffering and abstaining from worldly desires have stood as its two foundational principles. These principles are echoed in every mystical text, monastery, and piece of mystical guidance. Mysticism, in essence, closes the door to worldly happiness while building its foundation upon sorrow and asceticism (Abu Nasr 137). Countless instances illustrate this perspective, easily discernible in the biographies of mystics or within Sufi texts. Women are considered one of the earthly pleasures that, if clung to, can hinder progress on the spiritual path; hence, love for women is regarded as lustful and base, something to be avoided (Ghazali 2001 vol. 2, 28, and Sa'adi 100-101). Ibrahim ibn Adham is among the early figures in Islamic mysticism known for his avoidance of women, as he believed that women and children could entangle men in worldly affairs (Attar 2012, 91-93). Similar sentiments can be found in the practices of other Sufi elders, including Bayazid Bastami (Attar 2012, 181) and Abu Mohammad Mortaesh (Attar 2012, 516). Some Sufis even extended their abstinence from women to their legal wives, in accordance with sharia law. For instance, Ibn al-Khafif refrained from any intimate relations with his wife for forty years. On the night of his wedding, all he did was show her the wounds on his body from his ascetic practices (Al-Dailami 20-21). During the Mongol invasion, Najm-e Razi, a renowned mystic from the thirteenth century, out of fear for his life, abandoned his wife and children without taking any action to protect them (Razi 2000, 16-19). It seemed as if he left behind objects rather than family members. Such a misogynistic attitude was taken to extreme levels within the mystical sect known as 'Qalandar.' Members of this sect even went to the extent of "locking their male reproductive organs"

to avoid the temptation of engaging in sexual intercourse with women (Zarrinkoob 2000, 368). Not only did the Qalandar mystics disregard sharia law, but they also disregarded social customs and, as a result, family values (Kiani 246). It is evident that such continuous deprivation, combined with a misogynistic outlook, disrupts the psychological balance and engenders a strong inner desire for women. This repressed desire finds expression in the form of sexually explicit stories, as it cannot be adequately fulfilled due to the teachings of mysticism and the realities of society. Additionally, Zarrinkoob recognizes this sexual repression as a reason for the inclusion of such stories in the *Mathnawi* (2007, 417).

In response to their inner desires and, perhaps, to quell them, some mystic elders endorsed the concept of virtual love. Notably, Ayn al-Qudat Hamadani (d. 1130) and Ibn Arabi (d. 1241) even presented virtual love as a prelude to true love (love for God). This endorsement laid the foundation for the idea of virtual love. However, the concept of virtual love did not include women in Sufi texts and did not grant them an equal status with men. At best, women were perceived as a means to kindle love, a stepping stone towards achieving the love of God. In essence, women became a tool for sparking love within the hearts of disciples or elder mystics within a monastery. Occasionally, a mystic's interaction with a woman might serve as a form of recreation, making the rigorous ascetic life more bearable for mystics (Rumi 1926, 107).

Even a mystic like Ibn Arabi, whom scholars believe to be more tender-hearted towards women than other mystics, was unable to alter this situation. He, too, utilized the love of women as a tool to elevate men. His renowned statement, "Virtual love is the bridge to true love," encapsulates the utilitarian concept of women serving as a means for men to attain a higher purpose.

In contrast to scholars who have attempted to emphasize the role of women in Islamic-Iranian mysticism as a means to defend Persian literature's mystic poets, a contemplative examination of the works of great mystics reveals the opposite. Over the course of twelve centuries in Islamic mysticism, women have not managed to attain an equal standing with men within this tradition. Consequently, Islamic mysticism is characterized as a patriarchal discipline (Taheri 27), with its founders and supporters predominantly being men, while women have been marginalized.

#### **4. Women in Mystical Works**

Given that most mystical works were authored within monastic settings to impart wisdom to disciples, it becomes evident that these disciples, the primary audience for such works, hailed from diverse societal backgrounds, all drawn to Sufism and the monastic life (Zarrinkoob 2004, 73). Typically, the sheikhs overseeing these monasteries

recognized this diversity and incorporated it into the educational content they prepared. Among the subjects discussed in this masculine environment of the monastery, women held a certain allure for the disciples who were distanced from home, fatigued from their ascetic practices, and eager to glean insights into the otherwise concealed world of women. Moreover, in these narratives, Rumi delved into sexual matters explicitly and in great detail, further piquing their curiosity (Zarrinkoob 2007, 417).

However, within these stories, we can also discern the entrenched attitudes of mystics towards women, which were deeply ingrained in the minds of both the sheikhs and the disciples. A thorough examination of these narratives allows us to gain insight into the patriarchal worldview of women, a topic that will be explored in the following two sections.

#### **4.1. Representation of Women in Attar's Works**

Among the earliest pious women acknowledged by certain mystics in their writings as pioneers of Islamic mysticism is Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah (717-801 AD). She is said to have lived during the same period as Hassan al-Basri (d. 728 AD), one of the initial commentators of the Quran. However, in the last ten years of his life, al-Basri was frail and struggled to move and speak. Contrary to what biographers suggest, it appears unlikely that there was a close relationship between the two during this time (Soboot 4-5). Nonetheless, mystics persist in asserting their contemporaneity (Attar 2012, 67). They even go as far as to suggest that Hassan proposed to Rabi'ah, a claim upon which stories have been built, describing their supposed encounter as a meeting of minds and their collaboration in matters of spiritual progress and Sufism.

The outcome of these encounters between the two mystics was the wisdom-filled sayings of the young Rabi'ah. Her words of enlightenment, rarely found even in an elderly spiritual guide of the Sufi path, were imparted to Hassan al-Basri, an aging man, much like a guiding beacon. Summarized in one sentence, Rabi'ah's teachings emphasized the avoidance of sanctimonious behavior in Sufism and the rejection of insincere practices, encouraging instead the illumination of one's heart in the presence of God. It's worth noting that Hassan al-Basri himself holds the esteemed position of a leading Sufi sheikh, and his path is revered by various Sufi sects worldwide, regarding him as their sage. Nevertheless, in these stories, his mystical status is portrayed as inferior to that of Rabi'ah. These narratives are seemingly designed to elevate the standing of women in Islamic mysticism and provide a ready response to those who question this position. They argue that such accounts vindicate the notion that, in the path of God, gender holds no significance, allowing women to transcend traditional roles and even surpass men in their spiritual journey.

This is the superficial interpretation of the story. Delving beneath the surface, the profound mystic biographies and texts unveil the essence of women, including Rabi'ah, shedding light on the perspectives of mystics. Sullami (d. 1030 AD) stands as one of the early compilers of biographies of male mystics in Arabic, documented in a book titled "*Tabaqat al-Sufiyah*." Its popularity prompted Ansari (d. 1088) to later translate it into Persian with additional content. According to mystics, men of religion should maintain distance from women, as boldly asserted by Ibn al-Khafif al-Shirazi, one of the revered figures in Islamic mysticism: "Women should not be mentioned in the context of men of God (Al-Dailami 74)." In response to this gender-biased perspective, Sullami authored a separate book dedicated to the biographies of mystic women, ensuring that women's names remained distinct from men's. Following Sullami, numerous biographies of male mystics were written, devoid of any mention of women, until the fourteenth century when Attar penned his solitary prose work within the genre of mystic biographies, titled "*Tazkerat al-Awliya*" (Muslim Saints and Mystics). In this remarkable book, he elevates the status of Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah, placing her on equal footing with male mystics, marking a significant departure from previous biographers. Attar proceeds to provide an account of Rabi'ah (61-75) and her previously scattered quotations from mystic texts. Attar's inclusion of Rabi'ah is both exceptional and defensive. He seems to justify this decision as though he were defending himself against a grave transgression. He begins by explaining his rationale for featuring a woman in a book dedicated to the lives of male mystics, acknowledging a tradition that had prohibited such inclusion over the four centuries of Islamic mysticism until his time. He declares himself the one to break this tradition, stating, "Whoever walks in the way of God shall not be called a woman (61). Elsewhere, Attar makes a similar remark about Fatimah, the wife of Ahmad Khedruyah: "Whoever wants to see a man in women's clothing, look at Fatimah (349)." This justification, ostensibly in defense of Rabi'ah, reflects a misogynistic perspective rooted in a patriarchal worldview that diminishes the value of being a woman. Attar himself exhibits no intention to amend or moderate this discourse, as he goes on to assert that any woman who embarks on the path of God can no longer be considered a woman (61). It is as if being a woman is deemed a significant flaw, and thus, a Muslim mystic must relinquish their womanhood to join the ranks of men and be recognized as a mystic. Consequently, despite his break from tradition by featuring a woman in his book, he remains entrenched in the prevailing masculine discourse. It is worth noting that Rabi'ah is the sole woman to whom a dedicated chapter has been devoted in "*Tazkerat al-Awliya*."

Attar's departure from tradition paved the way for subsequent writers to delve into the biographies of mystic women without considering it a disgrace. In the seventeenth century, even Jami dedicated a chapter to the lives of mystic women at the conclusion of "*Nafahat al-Uns*" (Fragrance of Fondness). However, it is noteworthy that he titled this

chapter in Arabic as "A Memoir of Mystic Women Who Attained the Rank of Men" (615). This choice of title indicates that, in the following centuries, within the framework of this prevailing discourse, little had changed. Despite being concealed within the realm of mysticism, women continued to be perceived as the embodiment of deceit and cunning, mirroring the historical attitudes of patriarchal society toward women. Overcoming this deeply entrenched mindset proved to be a formidable challenge for women, preventing them from taking the lead.

Now, let's delve into the portrayal of women in Attar's five poetic works. Within his poems, Attar references ten renowned women, categorized as follows:

1. Women venerated as saints within religion: Eve, Mary, Aisha, and Fatima;
2. Among these, Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah is the sole mystic woman featured in "*Tazkerat al-Awliya*," with nine stories dedicated to her. Rabi'ah stands as the only mystic woman explicitly named by Attar in his poetic compositions;
3. Women symbolizing profound love in literature: Zuleikha and Layla;
4. Women of historical prominence: the wife of Harun Al-Rashid, the sister of Sultan Sanjar, and Zayn al-Arab.

The names of the other women mentioned in Attar's poems remain obscure and unknown. In general, when compared to his contemporaries, Attar adopts a more moderate stance towards women. Just as he boldly broke the taboo in "*Tazkerat al-Awliya*" by mentioning Rabi'ah's name alongside those of men, he also challenges conventions here by emphasizing the aspect of adoration in relationships with women. Through stories with similar themes, Attar endeavors to convey a sense of love transcending gender boundaries, a perspective that was also adopted by Rumi and manifested in "*Mathnawi*" (1930, 240).

Among his stories, the well-known tale of "Sheikh San'an" in "*Mantiq al-Tair*" (The Conference of the Birds) stands out in revealing the role of women in the mystical mindset. This story, with its recurring theme, has served as a template for other narratives. It is rooted in a robust masculine perspective that unmistakably mirrors the view of Islamic mysticism towards women. Instead of delving into a technical analysis of the story and Attar's use of narrative techniques, let's explore it further.

The summary of the story is as follows (from "*The Conference of the Birds*," pages 77-102): Sheikh San'an, an elderly man in Mecca with four hundred disciples, embarks on a journey to Rome after a dream. In Rome, he meets a Christian girl and falls in love with her. The Christian girl sets forth four conditions for marriage, all of which go against Islamic principles: bowing to an idol, burning the Quran, consuming wine, and tending to pigs for a year. Sheikh San'an agrees to all these conditions. His disciples are deeply perplexed and tearful, unable to unravel this enigma. After forty days of penance and

prayers by the disciples to save their Sheikh, he dreams of the Prophet of Islam, who informs him that there was a barrier between him and God, which has now been removed through this earthly love. The disciples are instructed to go to Rome and retrieve Sheikh San'an. In Rome, they witness the Sheikh casting aside his Christian attire and weeping. After performing ablutions and donning his dervish robes once more, Sheikh San'an returns to Islam and mysticism, his eyes still moist with tears, and departs for Mecca. The Christian girl, too, has a dream in which the sun advises her to follow the Sheikh and embrace his faith. She awakens, converts to the Sheikh's path and religion, Islam, and peacefully passes away after this transformation.

In this story, the elderly mystic man and the Christian girl represent the two central facets of this remarkable love tale. The narrative subtly favors the elderly man by predominantly focusing on his character and providing intricate details about his life, spiritual journey, disciples, and various locations, revealing the narrator's clear bias. On the other side stands the Christian girl, who, although depicted with less detail compared to the elderly man, is portrayed in a somewhat clichéd manner, adhering to literary conventions and primarily emphasizing the girl's youthful charm. By exploiting the affection of the elderly man and imposing her own unique conditions, the Christian girl demonstrates that she is not a genuine lover but rather seeks to convert him to her own faith. Consequently, this love story evolves into a theological battleground between the two religions, with the elderly man symbolizing Islam and the girl representing Christianity. Thus, the tale of "Sheikh San'an" becomes a symbolic conflict between right and wrong, rather than a portrayal of love and affection. In the final construction of such narratives, the forces of righteousness typically prevail. One can readily replace 'right' with 'Islam' or 'mysticism,' signifying their triumph over other religious or non-mystical paths. Implicit in these stories is the idea that a man, aligned with the Ahuraian or angelic side, encounters a woman who symbolizes the demonic, representing the demonic side. In some tales, such encounters even culminate in marriage, further reinforcing the sexist perspective entrenched in the patriarchal society of the Islamic world.

This storytelling pattern appears in various other texts as well. For instance, the tale of "Solomon and Bilqis" in Rumi's *Mathnawi* serves as a prominent example, concluding with Bilqis embracing Solomon's religion, Solomon's ultimate victory (representing 'right') over her, and their eventual marriage (Rumi 1930, 329-337). Similar instances can be found in the encounters of Abu Said Abu al-Khair (967-1048) with a sheikh who radiates an aura of tenderness, patience, purity from sin, and an intimate understanding of the secrets of the heart. This sheikh often engages with a beautiful woman, characterized by her bitterness, sins, and at times, notoriety for disbelief, aligning her

with the 'demonic' side. In these narratives, the woman's repentance typically marks the conclusion of such encounters (See, for instance: *Taste of the Time* 190). A similar transformation occurs in the story of a woman named Ishi Nili, who initially repudiates her faith but later becomes a disciple of Sufism under the guidance of Abu Said Abu al-Khair (Monavvar 73-74). Sha'wana from Ubulla presents another example; although early sources, such as Sullami's book, describe her piety, later centuries have portrayed her as a singer who repents and subsequently becomes a monastery disciple (Taheri 35-36 and Jami 617). *Musibat-Nama* (Tribulations of Spiritual Progress) also narrates the story of a sinful woman and her encounter with the Prophet of Islam, adhering to a similar narrative pattern (393-395).

#### **4.2. Representation of Women in Rumi's Works**

In Persian written and oral literature, when the subject of women and moral literature is involved, we often come across a vindictive view, discourteous language, and irrational beliefs (Karachi XI). These tendencies are even more pronounced in didactic literature, where a realistic approach is commonly adopted. In Persian mystical works, including Rumi's works, we observe the continuation of these literary traditions regarding women. Similar attitudes towards women and the same status and position are evident. However, there have been cases where women have received religious support or have been recognized in mysticism. Typically, these women are protected by an aura of holiness that shields them from any disrespect. Nevertheless, there are instances where this aura is disregarded, and these women are treated with the same patriarchal view. Regardless, the less renowned and celebrated a woman is in a story, the further she deviates from the aura of holiness and finds herself in her true position in society, among covetous men who hold a disdainful view of womanhood. In this worldview, femininity is depicted as the embodiment of witchcraft, deceit, and lust—an invitation to earthly desires and a departure from spirituality. According to this belief, as woman was created from the left rib of man, she is always prone to deviating from the truth and never finding the straight path. This mindset not only restricts women to the confines of their homes but also prescribes the roles of housewives and mothers as their best options. It dictates that their primary responsibility is to maintain the household, and their education is limited to their husband's house, which is considered the best school and monastery. Unfortunately, mysticism, as a powerful and influential school in the Islamic world, has not shown a willingness to challenge these entrenched mentalities over the past twelve centuries. It was established within the same patriarchal framework, guided by the same values, and led by men who were raised with similar beliefs, judging individual, family, and social life based on patriarchal criteria.

Rumi, a prominent figure in Islamic-Iranian mysticism, is renowned for his valuable works on spiritual progress. His *Mathnawi*, an encyclopedia of spiritual teachings, meticulously outlines the stages of spiritual growth 'Step by Step Up to Union with God' (Sajjadi 149). It is widely acknowledged by scholars that no other text in Islamic mysticism and the Persian language surpasses the *Mathnawi* (Zarrinkoob 2000, 299 and Sajjadi 149). Therefore, a study of this book allows us to delve into the profound insights of Rumi and gain a deeper understanding of Islamic mysticism, including its perspectives on various subjects, such as women. Rumi emphasized that his path followed the footsteps of Sanai (d. 1140) and Attar, making his mystical teachings accessible and comprehensible.

Due to the didactic nature of *Mathnawi*, Rumi went beyond simply recounting the biographies of mystics; instead, he chose to convey the teachings of the mystical school. He presented mystical concepts and teachings in the form of stories, which are woven throughout the six books of *Mathnawi*, consisting of 25,700 verses. These stories feature characters from various backgrounds, including kings, peasants, animals, and even inanimate objects. Each character contributes to the narrative of the human soul's separation from the heavenly realm and its yearning to return.

A significant number of women, sixty in total, are depicted as characters throughout *Mathnawi* (Karachi 2014, 98). They represent various aspects of reality, including mysticism, the call to godliness, patience, chastity, hypocrisy, deception, imperfections in intellect and religion, passion without wisdom, lust, and even bestiality. In some stories where women play minor roles and are not the central characters, Rumi occasionally interjects as a narrator, offering comments on women. The presence of women in *Mathnawi* holds great importance, as it allows us to gain insight into Rumi's true perspective on women, without any veil or justification. It is worth noting that many scholars have deliberately overlooked Rumi's negative views on women in order to preserve his reputation.

Like Attar's works, the presence of women in *Mathnawi* can be categorized into four groups:

1. Women who are revered as saints in the Quran and hadith: This category includes Asiya, Mary, Bilqis, Yahya's mother, Halima (the Prophet's nursemaid), Aisha (the Prophet's wife), and Fatima (the Prophet's daughter). Rumi generally praises these women, but there are instances where he implies their intellectual imperfections, which we will discuss later.

2. Mystic women who have become symbols in mystical texts: Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah and the maidservant of Anas ibn Malik are examples of such women, and Rumi consistently speaks highly of them. However, there are only a few references to such women in *Mathnawi*.

3. Women who are portrayed in classical Arabic literature (and subsequently in Persian literature) as symbols of true love, enduring all hardships to be united with their beloved. This group includes Leila, Azra, and Zuleikha. Rumi praises these women for their unwavering commitment to love, even in the face of adversity.

4. The general public of women depicted in *Mathnawi* consists of those who are either obscure and belong to different social classes, such as a fortuneteller, a Bedouin woman, the king's maid, the daughter of the king of China, and a nursemaid. There are also women who are infamous for blasphemy and mistreatment, such as the wife of Abu Lahab, the wife of Abu Jahl, the wife of Noah, and the wife of Abu al-Hassan Kharaqani.

Rumi's true perspective on women is not readily apparent in the descriptions of the first three categories due to the reverence associated with them. Rumi, like many others, adheres to the prevailing belief that religious saints and mystic women should be revered and not subjected to criticism. Criticizing them is seen as disrespectful to the spiritual path and hinderance to spiritual growth. Additionally, the literary mistresses in *Mathnawi* are depicted in a fictional and surreal manner, making it difficult to provide specific examples of their presence among the common people.

For this reason, their celebration is, in fact, a celebration of love epics. Rumi relies on this group of women to assert that love permeates the air, flowing through the world and reaching all individuals, regardless of gender (Rumi 1930, 246). Despite the aura of holiness surrounding the women in the first three categories, Rumi occasionally interjects into their stories and judges them using patriarchal criteria. Through these implicit and oblique judgments, he reveals his underlying beliefs. One such instance is the story of the Prophet of Islam and his wife. Aisha questions how the Prophet prays in every place, and Rumi quotes the Prophet's response, concluding with a remark to Aisha, implying that she should repent her envy to avoid resembling the devil (Rumi 1926, 399). This implies that he attributes envy to her. Another example is Solomon's encounter with the Queen of Sheba (Rumi 1930, 333), where Rumi subtly touches upon women's intellectual imperfections. Additionally, in the case of Yusuf (Joseph) and Zuleikha, although Zuleikha is often portrayed in literature as a symbol of unwavering love, *Mathnawi* highlights her cunning and sinister nature, which eventually leads to Yusuf's imprisonment (Rumi 1934, 471).

*Mathnawi* commentators, frequently referencing the first three categories of women, have ultimately reached the conclusion in their research that Rumi holds a positive view of women. By employing this tactic, they conveniently avoid delving deeper into the subject. However, to truly understand Rumi's genuine worldview, one must also examine the fourth category. It is within this group that we find a multitude of women who

emerge from the common people, leading ordinary lives and remaining relatively unknown. By examining this category more explicitly, we can begin to trace the origins of Rumi's attitudes towards women.

As mentioned previously, Rumi's attitudes towards women are not original to him; rather, he inherited them from his role models, whose influence can be traced within the *Mathnawi*. One such figure is Sanai, whom Rumi referred to as his leader. Sanai's intellectual system completely disregards women, and he explicitly expresses this viewpoint in his book, *Hadiqa al-haghigha* (Sanai 657-658).

Mohammad Ghazali, a prominent figure in Islamic mysticism and Rumi's spiritual leader, openly expresses his views on the inferiority of women. Ghazali goes as far as listing eighteen supposed defects with which God punishes women, including their fertility, once considered a feminine art (*Book of*, 270-272 and 282-283). According to Ghazali, women are deemed slaves to men, and he even suggests that they should prostrate themselves before their husbands if it were permissible (*The Alchemy* Vol. 1, 322). Ghazali firmly believes that women are created to bring destruction to men, thus advocating for their confinement within the home (*The Alchemy* Vol. 1, 314). Even within the confines of their homes, speaking a woman's name is considered a grave insult and a mortal sin (*The Alchemy* Vol. 1, 72). Ghazali insists on absolute obedience from women in their relationships with their husbands (*The Alchemy* Vol. 1, 319), and failure to comply may result in physical abuse, as exemplified by the story of Moaz beating his wife for looking outside the house through a peephole (*The Alchemy* Vol. 1, 317). Similarly, Shams Tabrizi, Rumi's esteemed spiritual guide, would beat his wife whenever she returned home late from the garden or a gathering with other women (Zarrinkoob 2011, 138). Ghazali also emphasizes the importance of female fertility, suggesting that women are deemed worthless if they are unable to conceive, comparing them to a mat in the corner of a house (*The Alchemy* Vol. 1, 303).

In his views on women, Shams Tabrizi shared the same perspective as Ghazali. In his sole remaining work, he strongly advocates for women to be confined to the home and engaged in trivial activities (282). What is noteworthy is that he even goes so far as to use the derogatory term "loony lady" when referring to women.

Rumi, shaped by the teachings of his mystical predecessors and the prevailing beliefs of his time, inherited the notion that women were considered the subordinate sex, undervalued even in their sleep (Rumi 1930, 362 and 1934, 497), and dependent on men for their existence (Rumi 1926, 43). He disregards women as a source of transcendence and instead views them as the cause of man's descent (Rumi 1934, 413). Rumi asserts that the human ego resembles women and is even worse (Rumi 1926, 338-339),

suggesting that it must be subject to the intellect's will (Rumi 1926, 142-143). He portrays women as the center of deceit and betrayal (Rumi 1930, 281-284 and 1934, 347), and believes that God has woven blasphemy into their essence like gold (Rumi 1999 vol. 1, 68). Rumi argues that women lack secrecy, and men should abstain from them, much like Yusuf abstained from Zuleikha despite her tenderness (Rumi 1934, 458). In contrast to men, Rumi sees women as lacking prudence (Rumi 1930, 362), entangled in greed and envy (Rumi 1926, 158), and manipulating men by weeping to fulfill their earthly desires (Rumi 1926, 130). It is, therefore, surprising that men trust intellectually imperfect women (Rumi 1926, 334). However, despite these generalizations, Rumi does acknowledge a select few women, including Mary, the mother of Jesus, as deserving of eminence (Rumi 1934, 363).

These and numerous other instances, which can be found throughout the *Mathnawi*, highlight the scholars' reluctance to discuss the subject, as mysticism, in its relationship with women, has adopted a similarly one-dimensional approach as the writers and poets in a thousand years of Persian literature. Rumi is no exception to this pattern. The prevailing patriarchal worldview, which rejects the hidden half of society and considers it the 'other,' remains unchanged. While Rumi may have praised women for their perceived aura of religious or mystical holiness, it was primarily due to his adherence to Muslim beliefs, which were shared by other poets and writers. Therefore, it is not a solid basis for asserting gender equality.

In defense of Rumi, some scholars have pointed to his collection of letters, known as *Maktubat* (The Letters), where he writes a letter to his daughter-in-law defending her against his own son (Taheri 168-170). However, these critics fail to acknowledge an important detail: Rumi's daughter-in-law was the daughter of Salahod'-Din Zarkub, who served as his caliph in the monastery. If the daughter-in-law were to be divorced, it would severely strain Rumi's relationship with Zarkub, as well as the monastery and his disciples. Given this context, Rumi had to support his daughter-in-law in order to maintain these important relationships, as any conflict between the young couple would have significant consequences for both Zarkub and Rumi's connection (see Zarrinkoob 2011, 197). One can only imagine the repercussions if the marriage were to end in divorce.

If we consider the insults that Rumi directed towards his opponents, particularly where women were the main target, his attitude becomes even more evident. In the *Mathnawi*, he launches sexual and misogynistic insults at his adversaries and, at times, even towards his own disciples (Rumi 1930, 329). Moreover, in his lyric poems, he continues down the same path, employing similar language to attack his opponents

(Rumi 1999, vol. 5, 15). The same pattern of insults can also be found in his work *Fihi Ma Fihi* (It Is What It Is), where he responds with derogatory remarks to someone questioning the existence of God (234). These insults can be observed abundantly in the writings of Rumi's predecessors, such as Sanai (670).

## 5. Conclusion

However, many researchers, due to their devotion to Islamic mysticism and mystic poets, generally have been fanatical, one-sided, and prescriptive (dualistic) in order to maintain their sacred position. Especially in the issue of attitude towards women, they have sought to justify the negligence of women by mystics. This is despite the fact that, firstly, theories such as the continuation of the patriarchal worldview and the Mithraic origin of Iranian-Islamic mysticism suggest that the attitude of this school towards women can undoubtedly be considered traditional and gender-oriented (patriarchal). Secondly, the mystical texts themselves, with their boundary-escape and center (meaning)-escape nature, directly or indirectly acknowledge their attitude and thus provide a possibility for some so-called "destructive" analysis, often contrary to the efforts of their fanatical admirers.

In this regard, the most important signs and contradictions in the works of two of the most famous and greatest mystical poets in Persian literature, Attar and Jalal al-Din Rumi, regarding the issue of "woman," show their gender-oriented and patriarchal attitude. It is worth mentioning that despite breaking traditions such as Attar's mention of mystical women and naming women as religious saints or symbols and objects of love in their works, they are still stuck in the male discourse that preceded them, and women have not been able to attain an equal position to men in this school.

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<sup>i</sup> Due to the lack of sufficient evidence and resources, it is not possible to date its emergence. What has been known today is that for the first time in 1400BC, the god of Mehr (Mithra) had been mentioned in a peace treaty between the two peoples of 'Hittite' and 'Mitanni' after a long dispute. These two peoples laid the foundation of their civilizations in Zagros. At the end of the peace treaty, the writers mentioned the god

of Mithra like the god of covenant and loyalty as a witness to be the guardian of peace (Vermaseren 15). Not only the time but also the place of origin of the Mithraic religion is not clear. What is known is that the name god of Mithra comes from Zagros and has a 'Median' origin (Diakonoff 90). The name is also mentioned in the Vedas and Avesta, which indicates the elevated status of Mithra in Hindu and Zoroastrian theology (See Razi 2002, 67). The religion reached Europe from Zagros, first in Rome, afterwards throughout Europe, and was welcomed by various European nationalities, about which much research has been done.

<sup>ii</sup> The point is that the scholars of mysticism insist on regarding mysticism as a legacy of Islam and derived from the Quran and Hadith; consequently, they categorically reject any derivation of it from non-Islamic origins. Although they admit that mysticism has been influenced by religions such as Buddhism and Christianity, and strands like Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism, they consider its origin to have emanated exclusively from the heart of Islam and the sources of the Quran and Hadith. There is no room here to refer to the different views of scholars on this subject, which are often repetitive; however, the following two works by Zarrinkoob are comprehensive sources in this regard:

-*The Value of the Heritage of Sufism*. 14-32 and 223;

- *A Quest for Persian Sufism*. 21-23.