Article

Friendships, Fidelities and Sufi Imaginaries: Theorizing Islamic Feminism

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Abstract: This article theorizes Islamic feminism as a form of 'friendship with/in tradition', drawing creatively on Sufism. It unpacks these feminist friendships as forms of 'radical, critical fidelity' which includes commitments and loyalties to tradition while simultaneously engaging critically with sexism, patriarchy, and homophobia. Core epistemological and ethical concerns are explored, including the nature of relationships to tradition; analytical methods for engaging with Muslim tradition from a gendered lens; religious authority and authoritarianism; and most significantly, engaging with emancipatory horizons of imagination that are attentive to the contemporary axes of power and privilege. The paper turns to rethinking approaches to hierarchy and possibilities for abuse, focusing on the shaykh–murīd and broader teacher–student relationships. It presents a nuanced approach to engaging with hierarchies as a serious analytical category that requires attention. Positing fluidity, transparency, and accountability as central to cultivating responsible hierarchical practices, the article suggests that friendship as a modality of relationships can contribute to such positive transformations. This article, emerging from a project on Muslim feminist ethics, presents creative theorizations of Islamic feminism as a liberatory project of human and divine friendships, inspired by Sufi ideas of *walāya*.

Keywords: Islamic feminism; gender; Sufism; walāya; friendship; spiritual abuse; grooming; feminist ethics; hierarchy; awliyā; sexism; homophobia; intersectionality; racism

1. Introduction

Muslim subjectivities, communities, and tradition-making are informed by diverse and cosmopolitan imaginaries. Islamic feminism represents one such contemporary development, emerging from within Muslim tradition and focused on developing a liberation theology. Amongst other things, such Islamic feminist scholarship addresses crucial epistemological questions about how to engage with tradition critically and constructively, in ways that are responsive to the contemporary ethical challenges of gender equality and social justice.

In the last three decades, the scholarship on Sufism and gender has developed into a significant area of study, making meaningful contributions to Islamic feminist debates. As part of a broader project on contemporary Muslim feminist ethics, this paper explores theorizations of Islamic feminism as a liberatory project of human and divine friendships. As such, inspired by Quranic descriptions of God as the ultimate Friend (*al-Walī*) and believers as being protecting friends (*awliyā*) of one another, and by selectively and creatively drawing on Sufi ideas of intimate friendship with the Divine (*walāya*), I offer some reflections on gender, relationality, and ethics. The following Quranic verses provide me with central inspiration in this regard:

> Allah is the *walī* (friend) of those who believe, (Allah) leads them from the depth of darkness into the light. (Quran 2:257)

> The believers, men and women, are *awliyā* (allies, protecting friends) of one another; they enjoin the doing of what is right (*al ma'ruf*) and forbid the doing

of what is wrong (*al-munkar*), and are constant in their prayers, and render the purifying alms, and pay heed unto Allah and Allah's Apostle. Allah bestows grace upon them, Indeed Allah is mighty, and wise. (Quran 9:71)

Behold, your only *walī* (protecting friend) shall be Allah, and Allah's Apostle, and those who have attained to faith—those that are constant in prayer, and render the purifying dues, and bow down [before God]: (Quran 5:55)

Surely, the friends (*awliyā*) of Allah, no fear shall be on them, nor shall they grieve. (Quran 10:62)

Drawing on Sufi approaches to *walāya* in this paper, I expand on this conceptual trajectory of friendship for theorizing Islamic feminism. I suggest that friendships in their various forms—friendships between human beings, friendships between men and women, and friendships with God—can provide ways to cultivate religious subjectivity and nourishing forms of relationality. These explorations attempt to critically respond to the hegemonic approaches to religious authority found in many Muslim communities. The paper turns critical attention to the issues of power, abuse, and hierarchy in shaykh–murīd and broader teacher–student relationships. Drawing on feminist reflections on modes of relationality and friendship, I reflect on ways to strengthen responsible and ethical praxis in teaching contexts.

2. Situating Islamic Feminism

Older debates on gender in Islam include claims that Islam and feminism are mutually exclusive and Islamic feminism is a contradiction in terms. The opponents, whether these are anti-religious feminists, Islamophobes, or patriarchal Muslim men, are strange bedfellows who, despite their different locations, all claim that narratives of gender justice are the primary and exclusive property of a secular west and are simply adopted by other groupings instrumentally.

Such simplistic binaries of Islam versus feminism are often premised on several inaccurate and problematic assumptions. Firstly, it ignores and silences a rich and robust legacy of Muslim gender contestations within the tradition. While it serves the gatekeepers of patriarchy to marginalize the contested nature of gendered histories within Muslim tradition, such silences do not accurately reflect the nature of Muslim tradition. Secondly, such binaries posit an erroneous separation between religious subjectivity and intellectual context, as if religiosity exists in a realm separate from people's broader social and intellectual milieu. Thirdly, such binaries assume that people are formed primarily by narrow narratives and exclusivist discourses, and that there is and must always be a tension between being Muslim and seeking gender justice. Ideas on gender justice, in this view, must always come from somewhere "outside" of where Islam exists; that is, it only has roots that belong exclusively to the sphere of the secular.[1] These interconnected assumptions are flawed and erroneous.

The narrow formulation of Islamic feminism runs contrary to the self-definitions of many Muslim feminists who present their work as a development, refinement, and application of their faith imperatives while party to the emerging conversations in various currents of feminist thought (Mir-Hosseini 2019; Sirri 2021; Al-Sharmani 2014; Shaikh 2003).[2] Before it was fashionable to use the language of the decoloniality of knowledge, Islamic feminists contributed to a broader decolonial archive by retrieving the genealogies of gender egalitarianism from within Muslim tradition, while engaging in what Chandra Mohanty, decades ago, described as "horizontal comradeship" and dialogical engagements with other feminist discourses (Mohanty 1991, p. 4). This involved the learning and sharing of analytical tools and solidarities between groups of feminists who are attentive to their embedded and specific locations and who do not assume a universal feminist voice, nor a singular type of subject.

I suggest that when Islamic feminists authorize, authenticate, retrieve, and imagine the past and engage with the present, we do so in complex and non-binary spaces that

are informed by the diverse intellectual vocabularies defining our contemporary worlds. Islamic feminists address crucial epistemological questions, including: what is the nature of a critical and constructive relationship to tradition; what analytical methods are crucial to engaging with Muslim tradition; what core resources within tradition are nourishing; how to critically engage contemporary forms of religious authority; and most significantly, how to develop inclusive and emancipatory horizons of imagination for our times at the intersection of numerous axes of power and privilege.[3]

3. Theorizing Islamic Feminisms: Friendship as Radical, Critical Fidelity

I offer a theorization of Islamic feminism as a 'friendship with/in tradition'; that is, a project of friendship suffused with intimate existential and ethical relationships based on love, nurture, devotion, and allegiance. (Shaikh 2021, pp. 46–47)[4] Using the composite preposition 'with/in' tradition signals that Islamic feminists navigate complex forms of belonging within Muslim communities: we are both insiders within the tradition, as well as scholars who analyze and evaluate parts of the tradition critically and reflectively. Such lived engagements and intellectual labor entails Islam-making as a process—Islamic feminists engage, wrestle with, and reimagine the nature of tradition through a constructive theological imagination that addresses social justice.

I suggest that Islamic feminism as a 'friendship with/in tradition' may be theorized as a position of 'radical, critical fidelity'.[5] Islamic feminists are often committed to and inspired by the rich Islamic teachings of God, human nature, and existential potential. However, such commitment includes forms of radical love that candidly critique all forms of prejudice and discrimination that might appear within other parts of the tradition. Such a radical, critical fidelity firmly opposes injustice and oppression, prioritizing the needs of those marginalized and on the periphery of Muslim communities. A radical politics engages with evolving notions of justice and gender while emphasizing increasingly inclusive understandings of God, human beings, and community. Moreover, this approach adopts an intersectional lens of analyzing social power; that is, the awareness that people and communities might occupy complicated positions of power and privilege in a complex social world of interconnected hierarchies, and that one cannot isolate gender from other social relations of power.

As such, a 'friendship with/in tradition' from this perspective is not only defined by a commitment to Islam, but also by a simultaneous critique towards parts of the tradition and community that are sexist, patriarchal, misogynistic, racist, and homophobic. While some Islamic feminists and gender activists do not address questions of sexual diversity,[6] increasingly, a number of Islamic feminists are more attentive to and critical of queerphobia and the demeaning of non-binary people within religious communities. Particularly for those Islamic feminists whose identities have been privileged by heteronormative and/or racist ideologies, we/they are called upon to expand a critical feminist lens to the damaging axes of patriarchy, homophobia, and racism. Jerusha Lamptey, drawing inspirationally on prophethood as exemplifying a social critique of power and hegemonic elites, points to the importance of Islamic feminist reflexivity around one's positioning within a dominant status quo. She urges Islamic feminists to engage in actively destabilizing complex systems of unjust privilege, within which we might be co-opted and benefit from. (Lamptey 2018, p. 154). The imperative to critically engage with intersecting forms of injustice as they appear and exist on the social horizon will enable us to deepen the moral compass of Islamic feminist commitments.

The contribution of Islamic feminists as part of this relationship with/in tradition is three-fold. Firstly, they critically deconstruct parts of the tradition, past and present, that are patriarchal, androcentric, racist, and/or homophobic. Secondly, they retrieve, recover, and bring into visibility the marginalized histories of women, black, and/or queer folk, as well as foreground gender egalitarian narratives from within the histories and current practices of the tradition. Thirdly, they reconfigure, reimagine, and envision core theological and

ethical categories in ways that are inclusive of all human beings as part of the ongoing work of creating egalitarian and spiritually vivifying tradition.

As such, these engaged scholars might varyingly conform, be inspired by, dissent, reject, and reconstitute previous ideas and methods, while presenting original new insights. In these complex relationships to the past, they are part of a long historical trajectory of believers who are both the subjects and contributors to an emerging Islamic tradition unfolding in the present.[7] Foregrounding these kinds of relationships with/in tradition highlights the obvious, but sometimes elided, reality that religious traditions are dynamic and continuously being shaped by historically situated human beings—and in particular, that Islam as a tradition continues to be in-process and co-created by diverse individuals and communities in the contemporary period.

Kirsten Wesselhoeft has recently described Islamic feminist work as constituting an intimate "set of ethical relationships in their own right" (Wesselhoeft 2017, p. 169). From the perspective of Islamic feminists, gender justice is a central ethical imperative for the cultivation of Muslim subjectivities and the embodiment of Islamic virtue in the present. As such, it presents a vision for contemporary Muslim becoming. I suggest that a 'radical, critical fidelity' describes how Islamic feminists engage with modes of religious becoming through inclusive, compassionate, critical, justice-based, imaginative, and courageous ways of being" (Shaikh 2021, p. 47). I thus locate Islamic feminism as an expansion, elaboration, and development of Muslim tradition in the contemporary period.

To further elaborate my theorization, I propose that Islamic feminism as a 'friendship with/in tradition' defined by a "radical, critical fidelity" signals the following:

1. an overarching commitment to being part of an unfolding Muslim tradition;
2. mapping human subjectivities and social formations within a foundational God–human relationship that grounds the processes and goals of individual and social life in the attainment of a right relationship with God;
3. a conceptualization of tradition, theology, and religious knowledge as open, dynamic, and ongoing processes;
4. a critical and constructive engagement with past/present intellectual legacies and practices within the living tradition of Islam;
5. contesting authoritarian modes of religious authority;
6. an enduring commitment to gender justice that is responsive to the grounded social realities of a context and receptive to emerging calls for ever-more comprehensive forms of social justice that intersect with race, sexuality, and a host of other axes of power;
7. asserting the full moral and religious agency of every believer, with a commitment to centering the experiences of those oppressed and marginalized in the community
8. including Muslim women's experiences as an epistemological base to theorize;
9. rethinking the binary gender formulations that pervade the legacy, including perspectives of Muslims who identify as queer and non-binary;
10. seeking to establish forms of sociality that nourish the full spiritual possibilities, intrinsic dignity, and social equality of every human being.

I offer this ten-point conceptualization as a way to deepen the reflections on forms of radical, critical fidelity within Islamic feminism. Given that I propose friendship as a mode of relationality for Islamic feminism, I proceed to unpack in more detail some theological ideas on friendship.[8]

Friendship is an evocative concept that helps us to reimagine modes of relationships built on intimacy, reciprocity, mutuality, and fluidity, which have the potential to reconfigure ideas of power and static hierarchies. I engage the ideas of friendship whilst drawing on Sufi ideas, as well as the work of selected contemporary theorists.[9] My approach to Sufism generally—and to Sufi concepts of *walāya* in particular—is critical, creative, and constructive. While drawing on these ideas, my readings are not bound by previous contours of signification and meaning. Moreover, as I have argued in previous work, Sufism is a multifaceted and polyphonous tradition, without a monolithic approach to

gender (Shaikh 2012). It is inaccurate to represent Sufis as the "good Muslims", with a singularly peaceful, pluralistic, and gender egalitarian form of Islam, as depicted in some forms of contemporary media (Safi 2011).

Through time, Sufi discourses present us with a range of approaches to gender from highly patriarchal formations, on one end, to radically egalitarian approaches on the other, with many instances of crisscrossing on this spectrum. Sufi teachings and communities in various spaces also reflect ambivalences and tensions around gendered practices and concepts, which are embodied and negotiated in varied ways by practitioners.[10] Meena Sharify-Funk (2020) provides an instructive review of the state of scholarship at the intersection of Sufism and gender, noting the expansion of this field beyond text-based scholarship to include ethnographic data from diverse contemporary Sufi communities. Such studies based on fieldwork in Muslim contexts ranging from South Asia (Abbas 2002; Pemberton 2010), West Africa (Hill 2018), Turkey (Raudvere 2002), Egypt (Schielke 2008), and the Americas (Hernandez-Gonzalez 2019; Dickson 2015; Sharify-Funk et al. 2018), illustrate the varied lived negotiations of gender through spaces of musical performance, rituals, and shrine cultures, as well as both formal and informal types of women's leadership in established Sufi tariqas (Sharify-Funk 2020, pp. 59–60). Furthermore, Sharify-Funk suggests that there are marked differences between two contemporary interpretive approaches to understanding gender dynamics in Sufism, which she describes as progressive (Shaikh 2012; Silvers 2010) and traditionalist (Murata 1992; Dakake 2008), respectively. She observes:

> Whereas scholars with a Traditionalist orientation seek to revalorize the spiritual and socioreligious norms of premodern Islam and deflect modernist critiques, many scholars within the progressive Muslim community articulate respect for Sufism while nonetheless subjecting historical practices and writings to critical scrutiny, without deference to traditional authority structures...Scholars who adopt the (progressive) orientation place emphasis on critically analyzing both text and context, with attention to power dynamics, historicist critique, and the social construction of oppressive relationships. In contrast to this liberatory project, Traditionalists frame their own scholarship as a defence of an integral, ancient culture against cultural imperialism. In contrast to historicity, Traditionalists invoke what they regard as transhistorical and perennial values (Sharify-Funk 2020, pp. 64–66)

Pointing to this distinction, Sharify-Funk illustrates that the pre-understandings, commitments, and hermeneutical lenses of scholars significantly impact their interpretations of a tradition with diverse, and at times tensive, approaches to gender. Given the liberationist perspective that is intrinsic to Islamic feminism, and in continuity from my previous work that Sharify-Funk describes as "progressive," I am explicitly engaging Sufism from a contemporary set of lenses invested in notions of human equality that embrace the integrity between spiritual and social justice. However, my approach is not about essentializing Sufi ideas, but rather drawing fruitfully on the central resources within Sufism to enable creative and egalitarian imaginaries.

4. Creative Readings of Walāya

Traditionally in Sufism, friendship as *walāya* has strong currency.[11] *Walāya*, as a verbal noun in Arabic, is a term that incorporates a complex range of meanings surrounding friendship, including notions of proximity, intimacy, love, loyalty, assistance, mutuality, protection, and power. The Quran, in over 40 instances, describes God as the Divine Friend (*Al-Walī*), and identifies exemplary human beings as "*awliyā Allah*," friends of God, with the term *walāya* occurring twice in the Quran, and the trilateral root *w-l-y* in the Quran occurs over 232 times (Lawson 2016, p. 24).[12]

Interpretations of *walāya* have a powerful and diverse circulation in Muslim tradition and have resulted in varied understandings of the concept in different fields of Islamic tradition, including, amongst others, law, mysticism, and philosophy. These readings and

applications have been shaped by the assumptions, contexts, and discourses of distinct groups of Muslim interpreters.[13] It is noteworthy that premodern male legal scholars, drawing on the same root term, elaborated on the dimension of protection from within their patriarchal worldview to create the juristic concept of male guardianship (*wilāya*) over women (Mir-Hosseini et al. 2015). Muslim feminists have illustrated how this juristic concept has enabled inequitable hierarchical forms of male authority and contributed to restricting female legal capacity in Islamic law (Ibid.). The Islamic feminist Asma Lamrabet (2015) reveals the ways in which most premodern jurists selectively interpreted the Quranic text in relation to their own gendered historical and sociocultural conditioning, while ignoring other explicitly egalitarian Quranic invocations in order to reinforce extant gender hierarchies. Moreover, she powerfully retrieves inclusive Quranic teachings and selected exegetical works on Q 9:71, situating these within broader Quranic ethical concepts to argue for a vision of *wilāya* that urges all believers to collectively and inclusively build the common good (*al-ma'ruf*) and forbid that which is bad (*al-munkar*) in the public and domestic spheres. Using a contemporary lens, she argues that this notion of *wilāya* can be applied to demands for full and equal citizenship of men and women, as well as the joint work of building just and morally equitable societies (Lamrabet 2015, pp. 71–76).

What becomes apparent from some of these debates is that language, terminology, and concepts like *walāya*/*wilāya* constitute meaning-making units within diverse communities of believers and within varied Muslim discourses. Interpretive communities, engaging with the specific ethical, spiritual, and political assumptions and norms of their times, have created varied trajectories of meanings from these concepts. As such, notions of *walāya*/*wilāya* have unfolded in diverse and ambivalent ways, both historically and contemporarily, in areas of Sufism and jurisprudence, amongst others. To innovatively engage deeply-rooted Islamic concepts in ways that respond to the emerging challenges and systemic inequalities and that seek to animate more justice-based forms of praxis is indeed the broader mandate of Islamic feminism specifically, and Islamic liberation theology more broadly. As such, my contemporary reading of *walāya* freshly engages with specific Sufi ideas in ways that both attend to the challenges of authoritarianism that the concept has engendered, while also addressing the imperatives of justice and beauty from within the tradition.

Within Sufism, the term *walāya* is used to signify relationships embodied by spiritually refined human beings whose work of inner cultivation has resulted in a loving proximity to God; that is, a friendship to God. These *awliyā*, or friends of God have attained the ideal, ultimate human subjectivity in spiritual terms. Sufis have developed elaborate mappings of *walāya*, with the 11th century Hujwiri's sweeping assertion that the foundations of Sufism and the knowledge of God rests on *walāya* (Hujwiri 1982, p. 210). For the 13th century Ibn 'Arabi, *walāya* is primarily differentiated by the experiential knowledge (*ma'rifah*) of those who have attained deep intimacy, love, and friendship with God (Lawson 2016, p. 19). As such, the goal of human life, or the ideal human subjectivity for a believer to aspire towards, is this kind of aspirational friendship. Hence, friendship presents a central form of interaction around which Sufi concepts of personhood and theology revolve: self-formation that attains the deepest knowledge in spiritual terms is intriguingly described as a reciprocal relationship between the ultimate Divine friend and the human being.

Drawing on Sufism and expanding ideas of a friendship with God founded on love and intimacy as an aspirational form of religious subjectivity and relationality is part of my Islamic feminist project. Friendship offers an archetypal model for relationship to the Real; and pursuing this relationship assists the believer in attaining the ultimate ends of Islam. Spiritual refinement is contingent on forms of friendship, and the cultivation of spiritually imbued friendships in the social world simultaneously nourishes friendship with the Divine friend (*Al-Walī*), while allowing us to give form or social reality to this innate divine quality of friendship lodged within the human heart. This theological lens enables us to recognize our images of the Divine in ways that have the potential to reconfigure approaches to the God–human relationship and to interpersonal relationships.

Walāya in Sufism has been typically used to designate specific forms of spiritual attainment and the range of relationships forged by a special, rare group of people who have realized high stations of intimacy and friendship with God.[14] Historically, Sufi ideas of *walāya* are embedded in notions of distinct spiritual hierarchy, where the friends of God occupy various positions, degrees, ranks, and levels of proximity to the Divine (Hujwiri 1982, pp. 212–15; Chodkiewicz 1993).[15] As such, the *awliyā* in Sufism describes a relatively elite group of people who, having attained divine friendship, play a unique cosmological and social role and become the purveyors of blessings, miracles, and various teachings (Cornell 2010; Palmer 2019).

In particular, within Sufism, the *awliyā* are those exceptional individuals whose modes of being, spiritual discipline, and internal cultivation have enabled them to attain forms of knowledge such that they are socially benevolent and empowering for their communities. The internal state of an accomplished *walī* is such that she is able to see with two eyes: the eyes of distinctiveness, recognizing human diversity in all its complexity and varying states of consciousness ranging from the lowest to the highest, while simultaneously apprehending the unitive, exalted divine spirit within each human life. As such, service to God seamlessly translates into service to other human lives and all creation. What becomes evident from this perspective is that service for others is a form of worship of God premised on the recognition of the immanent divine presence in all human beings—an integration of the principle of the unity of being, and that of Divine Oneness (*Tawḥīd).* Thus, the friends of God are friends to their people and serve the needs of their community at multiple levels, including—as many Sufi orders the world over have demonstrated—through material and social support responsive to the immediate needs of the society (Renard 2008, pp. 141–52). Accordingly, spiritual refinement is connected to the collective good, and thus intrinsically has socio-political implications.

5. Hierarchy, Power and Accountability

There is clearly a spiritual hierarchy embedded in the notions of *walayā* as signifying the highest form of refinement—the more refined a person becomes, the more intimate is their friendship with the Divine, and thus the more exalted is their spiritual station. Within Sufism, the teaching relationships between spiritual teachers and their students are contingent on a hierarchy of power. However, not all forms of hierarchy need to be intrinsically damaging or detrimental. Any cursory analysis of society reveals to us that some forms of hierarchy are in fact necessary and beneficial. In much of social life and learning, people occupy varied positions of knowledge, skill, and capacity, serving the diverse needs of a society.

From a certain perspective, all pedagogical relations are invariably hierarchical as teachers have greater skills or knowledge than their students, and in the process of education and instruction, they enable the growth and empowerment of the student in that particular sphere. This necessary, dynamic form of power wielded by skilled or learned persons in various sectors of a society has been described in social theory as a form of "competent authority" (Wrong 2017, pp. 52–59). Such forms of hierarchical power are not fundamentally problematic, in so far as they do not result in abuse, injustice, or exploitation.

Hierarchies in these relationships of learning are not meant to be static or fixed. Even in cases when the teacher is a competent authority, it is necessary to recognize that a pedagogical relationship also results in the teacher's transformation and growth. Learning happens both ways in any teaching relationship; for example, most university professors will readily recognize that one learns most when teaching, not only through figuring out meaningful ways to communicate ideas to one's students, but also from the rich experiential insights, questions, and perspectives of their students. This pedagogical dynamic is especially relevant within Sufism, where spiritual teachers and their students are not in stagnant relationships, nor are their internal states unchanging. A beautiful description of the dynamic, shifting roles between students and teachers is reflected in the work of the influential 13th century Sufi, Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn al-ʿArabī on his relationship with Shaykh Yusuf Al-Kumi: "He assisted me and I assisted him...He was for me a master and a disciple

simultaneously, and I was the same for him".[16] Indeed, reciprocity and mutual impact in teaching relationships occur even when not explicitly acknowledged.

Generally, the Sufi shaykh–murīd relationship is premised on the assumption that power is invested in a trustworthy teacher who has achieved some success in scouring the dross of the lower self and the ego. Serving to mirror qualities of virtue, the teacher guides students to their own inner purification, reflecting a constructive, generative use of power. The hierarchical teaching relationship is thus meant to enable the optimal learning of the student from a teacher who embodies higher forms of knowledge, but who continues to also be in a state of internal growth and transformation for as long as the teacher is alive. Invariably, there are ebbs and flows in power that are contingent on the changing positions and relationships that people inhabit, as when the student becomes a teacher, or the ways that a teacher, through the teaching relationship, also grows, learns, and deepens her insights.

Nonetheless, these power differentials and hierarchies can be mismanaged and even abused due to the powerful position that teachers occupy. In this regard, Sufis have certainly not been immune.[17] In more benign cases, teachers—to the best of their own understanding and with sincerity— provide guidance that is sometimes inappropriate in a given context. Even the most developed spiritual teachers are fallible, socially-conditioned people with specific individual temperaments, as dimensions of selfhood do not simply disappear in light of spiritual refinement. While accomplished, receptive teachers might often overcome their very specific limitations, there are invariably instances and times when they will be unable to do so. This is simply the nature of the human condition—and indeed, in my view, a hidden gift that paradoxically enables and demands the cultivation of an internal discernment in the teaching relationship for both parties.

More problematic are cases of fraudulent spiritual teachers, manipulating their followers and abusing their positions of trust. Given the prioritization of the inner state, and the often opaque nature of these dimensions of power, Sufism is perhaps more vulnerable to unethical manipulation as reprobate charismatic teachers can justify their misconduct claiming that there is an inner, esoteric wisdom at work.[18] Here, it is necessary to also fully recognize the potential for malevolent abuse that can be part of all pedagogical hierarchies and that do not have the necessary checks and balances to ensure accountability.

The challenge in the context of Sufism is that it is not uncommon for a teacher to diagnose an inner imbalance and ask the student to do things that are uncomfortable for the latter. Here, a student's compliance with such instructions might be spiritually necessary; thus, experiencing discomfort or frustration at a teacher's directive or advice is not in itself a reason to reject a spiritual teacher's instruction. This is where it becomes tricky. It is challenging to navigate this ethical terrain because a student, in the process of self-formation, needs to make a judgement call whether, on one hand, a specific teaching or instruction by her teacher that makes her uncomfortable is, in truth, based on the teacher's deeper wisdom, and the agitation she is experiencing is due to the students own limited state. In this case, it is important that the student overcomes her discomfort and complies with her teacher's instruction to enable her growth. On the other hand, there may well be substantive spiritual and ethical reasons that she is experiencing discomfort, and in this case, it is necessary for her to be attentive to feelings of inner dissonance. It is possible that there is some flaw or problem with the teacher's advice or instruction, either due to the latter's sincere but limited perception of a specific situation, or of the latter's ill-intent. Thus, there is a delicate balance between deferring to the wisdom of a teacher who can be trusted to safely enable one's growth as a student, and being attentive to one's own inner spiritual, ethical, and moral compass when a teacher's instructions bring discomfort.

It is of course easier for a student to resist teachings that violate fundamental aspects of one's dignity and personal integrity, especially if one does not have an enduring relationship of trust with a teacher. However, this is seldom how these scenarios unfold. In most cases, students stick with a teacher who has proven to be helpful, supportive, and effective in their lives over a period of time. It becomes more difficult for the student to resist an instruction if the teacher has served as an integral and positive part of her life trajectory and growth over a long period and has thereby earned her trust. It is in these cases that a student might more easily override his or her own internal dissonance or doubts and adhere to a teacher's misguided, or even exploitative, instructions that might ultimately be damaging to the self and others.[19] In order to encourage students to retain some inner vigilance and agency, it is necessary to critically engage with understandings of the shaykh–murīd relationship. In fact, the potential excesses of esoteric Sufi authority have been part of the impetus for internal reform and ongoing debates within Sufi movements at various points in Muslim history (Werbner 2013).[20]

In the contemporary period, while recognizing the power differentials between spiritual teacher and student, reformulating this relationship as a friendship might open a third space to animate healthier shaykh–murīd relationships. Friendship as a form of relationality might more easily promote engaged conversation, questioning, probing, reflection, accountability, and transparency as meaningful modes of engagement with, rather than unquestioning obedience to, a shaykh. While the shaykh–murīd relationship is embedded within clear forms of authority, friendship as a mode of engagement invites the possibilities for a more conscious awareness and ethical navigation of these power differentials.

Here, it might be valuable to distinguish between authority and authoritarianism. Given that the spiritual seeker/student actively invests power in the shaykh/teacher, either by deciding to take a formal oath of allegiance (*bay ʿa*) or to establish a more informal connection, this form of authority rests on a form of power "granted from 'below'" (Wilcox 2021, p. 3).[21] That is, respect and admiration are granted by the student, based on the teacher's accomplishments—and in the case of Sufi teachers, their spiritual capacities, rather than the power that is exerted primarily from 'above' and unidirectionally. In seeking to establish and deepen ethical forms of authority, Melissa Wilcox (2021) incisively suggests that not only should it be clearly recognized that authority is granted from below, but the authority granted to a teacher should also be engaged with through attention to the *process*; that is, authority should be granted and accessed based on *how* the teacher engages (Wilcox 2021, p. 3). Such approaches to relationship dynamics in the shaykh–murīd dyad help to develop models of authority that are contingent on and answerable to ethically robust forms of power and authority. Invoking friendship as a model for constituting these forms of relationships would more easily enable conscious and critical attention to interpersonal dynamics, transparency, and accountability. Such attention creates openings for "friendship and ethical authority to co-exist, especially if that authority is by definition granted from below" (Wilcox 2021, p. 3). In my view, reconstituting forms of relationality within teacher–student dynamics can invite a deeper exploration of the processes that nurture and sustain ethical and accountable authority. Such explorations help us to resist forms of authoritarianism that position teachers and students in rigid, coercive relationships of power characterized by blind obedience and submission, and an absence of accountability, that collectively create fertile ground for possible abuses.

Furthermore, it is important to also recognize that any approach to friendship amongst human beings cannot ignore the broader power relationships within society. In an illuminating study of friendship in the context of Catholicism, Brenna Moore alerts us to the fact that as we focus on the interpersonal dynamic of friendship, social and political power do not drop off the map (Moore 2015). Friendship, she astutely notes, "is no safe haven from other kinds of power, no magic circle protected haven from race, gender, and class" (Moore 2015, p. 439). Friendships are always entangled in "discursive power", which she argues,

> shapes the desires of men and women, desires that come to see some people as more powerful or worthy of love and attention than others, and these become critical energizing forces for friendships. And yet, for the men and women caught up in these social forces, their life experiences are not entirely reducible to them. Personal relationships have their own specific power, particularly a power for cultivating religious sensibilities. (Moore 2015, p. 444)

Embracing the spiritually transformative potential of friendships, it is equally important to recognize that such friendships are also always situated in the real worlds of systemic inequalities. Zahra Ayubi (2019, p. 188) astutely explored how influential premodern Muslim philosophers and Sufis present friendship as valuable ethical spaces for elite, homosocial men, and they often employ the contrast of marriage to women as the lower or baser foil to help illuminate the deeper value of male friendships. Such elitist ideas were essentially premised on the exclusion of slaves, women, and lower-class men. Hence, friendships are always enmeshed in social networks of power that impose substantive boundaries and limits to the ways in which such relationships might unfold. In the contemporary period, the capacity to foster friendships based on mutuality demands an internal vigilance against the structures of sexism, homophobia, and racism, amongst others, that position individuals and groups in very different ways.

Friendship does not eliminate power differentials; however, when engaged with deliberation and discernment, it potentially invites a more horizontal, dialogical form of relationship. Opening spaces for engaged conversation might nurture the subtle but vital equilibrium needed between refining love and deference and healthy autonomous judgement in a shaykh–murīd relationship. This might be one way to deal with the potential danger of esoteric authority, where wisdom is

presented as opaquely cloaked in the realms of interiority, making ethical accountability and moral transparency more difficult.[22]

There is an interesting play between the inner and outer realms, within both Sufism and Islamic feminism, an intersection that requires some deeper probing. There is a positive side to the focus on interiority within Sufism: spiritual hierarchy in Sufism is not intrinsically linked to social identities. As I have argued elsewhere, patriarchy—premised as it is on gender-based hierarchy and essential male superiority—is spiritually detrimental to men and women alike (Shaikh 2015). In fact, Sufism focuses on the inner levels of refinement as a measure of value for human life—a measure that is intrinsically equally open to every person. Accordingly, no socio-biological or political construct of power can determine one's fundamental human value. Every human being has equal access and inherent spiritual capacity and shares the same ultimate goals in this life. Herein lies the deep-rooted ontological and spiritual equality that is at the heart of Islam; a universal invitation that many Sufi teachings have foregrounded, as have Islamic feminist works.

Islamic feminists have provided rich and textured ideas on foundational ungendered concepts like primordial human nature (*fiṭra*) and moral agency (*khilāfa*) grounded in a matrix of Divine unicity (*tawḥīd*)—where the sole criterion for the distinction between human beings is a person's state of God-consciousness (*taqwā*)—as central to Muslim theology (Wadud 2015; Lamptey 2018, pp. 157–66). Compellingly, they argue that such foundational egalitarian assumptions are potentially disruptive of other social-driven indices of value and prestige, and ground Islamic theology in a deeply rooted ontological justice. Yet these theological concepts, as affirming, emancipatory, and powerful as they might be, are immersed in specific lived contexts which varyingly shape how they are experienced (Hoel and Shaikh 2013; Lamptey 2018). Recognizing that human beings, particularly those who belong to less powerful social groups, are enmeshed in webs of power and relationality that often restrain their agency, Jerusha Lamptey astutely asks Islamic feminists to imagine creative engagements with systemic constraints in the work of social and spiritual transformation, what she calls "transformative taqwa". In response to this incisive question, I suggest that consciously cultivating dialogical, transparent friendships that recognize the competent authority granted to a shaykh, while attentive to the inherent power imbalances within that relationship, can offer more transformative modes of relationality that address the process of how guidance and mentoring takes place.

At present, some Sufi orders appear to be engaging with more transformative pedagogies. Rose Deighton-Mohammed's (2022) study of the contemporary Nur Ashki Jerrahi community in New York city, led by Shaykha Fariha al-Jerrahi, points to forms of Sufi authority that explicitly embrace egalitarian interpersonal dynamics and inclusive communal interactions. The Turkish female Sufi, Shaykha Cemalnur Sargut in Istanbul, similarly engages with her majority female disciples in ways that suggest more transparent, dialogical forms of authority (Neubauer 2016). The contemporary American Shaykh, Kabir Helminski of the Mevlavi order, offers some insightful reflections on the textured nature of the transformative relationships between shaykh and dervishes (Helminski n.d.).[23] These contemporary Sufi teachers who appear to embody forms of competent authority and sensitivity to questions of mismanagement and abuse, are inspiring. More broadly, contemporary online Muslim groups, like *In Shaykh's Clothing* (https://inshaykhsclothing.com) and *Facing Abuse in Community Environment* (https://facetogether.org/), and the South African mosque, *Claremont Main Road Masjid* (CMRM_SexualHarassmentPolicyFinal_05May2019.pdf (accessed on 17 July 2023), are creating critical awareness against religious abuse, and have produced valuable codes of conduct available globally to communities and organizations for self-regulation and accountability. Such models of power help to reimagine religious authority, spiritual guidance, and pedagogical dynamics. To summarize, I am suggesting that in a shaykh–murīd relationship, the thoughtful, sensitive, and conscious cultivation of a friendship defined by openness, accountability, and transparency responds creatively to the inherent constraints of power imbalances in such pedagogical relationships. Moreover, developing such models of friendship as a broader mode of sociality offers the potential to deepen forms of recognition, mutuality, and congeniality between people coming from different social groups.

6. Conclusions

Combining Sufi ideas of *walāya* as friendship animated by a radical, critical fidelity within Islamic feminism enables a vigilance against iterations of tradition and community that are unjust or demeaning to any human being. Instead of seeking freedom and liberty only in an ineffable spiritual realm, an integral Sufi-inspired feminist approach encourages us to seek a continuity and congruence between the theological perspectives on human nature and practical demands for social equality.[24]

Truly discerning friends need to traverse the inner and the outer complexities of power to arrive at forms of relationality that are mutually vivifying and recuperative. A Sufi-inspired feminist approach must therefore demand that we reconfigure our paradigms of value, which enable us to call out all damaging forms of social hierarchy, including patriarchal approaches within Sufi groups and Muslim communities more broadly, as well as other structural inequalities that one may encounter in broader society.

In particular, Sufism, with a rich tradition of engendering radical love for the Divine, potentially fosters a receptivity within human beings for higher forms of consciousness, for embodying virtue, for recognizing every human being and all creation as embodiments of the Divine spirit, and a radical aspirational love that can potentially embody ever more encompassing respect for human dignity and justice. In foregrounding the foundational equality intrinsic to the human condition and the imperative of mutual refinement as the ultimate goal of human relationships, there is rich practical and theoretical potential for the category of friendship through drawing on a Sufi framework.

Walāya has traditionally been used to describe the attainment of (a relatively small elite group of) spiritually attained people; that is, the *awliyā* in Sufism. I suggest both rethinking the term and broadening its reach for the purposes of Islamic feminism. Expanding the imperatives and resonance of *walāya* as a form of relationality based on spiritually refining and refined friendships open to all Muslims is one way to imagine a socially transformative ethical landscape for our times. Indeed, gender-justice is an intrinsic form of contemporary self-cultivation, and the embrace of a 'radical, critical fidelity' enables modes of belonging and friendship that can be critical and constructive. Such friendship, as both a practical and theoretical category, has enormous potential to foster spiritually-imbued and socially engaged forms of relationality. The work of rethinking friendships as a conceptual category, a mode of relationality, and an approach to Islamic tradition through integrating a stance of 'radical, critical fidelity' within Islamic feminism is the primary contribution of this paper to the literature.

Proposing "friendship" is a way of imagining refining forms of relationality that reconfigure power and moving us away from static hierarchies and encouraging us towards forms of mutuality, love, respect, and accountability. There are productive and fertile spaces within Islamic feminism to think of friendship in encompassing ways that include friendships with tradition, friendships with current and past spiritual teachers, friendships with peers and cohorts, friendship with men and women, friendship as a mode of relation to the self, friendships with the Prophets, and, indeed, always and ultimately with the Divine Friend.

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Notes

1   Strassfeld and Henderson-Espinoza (2019, p. 85) commenting on Talal Asad's pioneering insights on secularism, state: "secularism is not secular. . .but functions as an unmarked and thereby naturalized form of white Protestantism disciplining (premodern, irrational, racialized) religion". Melissa Wilcox (2021, p. 1) notes in this regard that "claims of, accusations of, and mandates for secularity in movements for gender justice are not only colonialist, white supremacist, and Islamophobic but also in a subtler sense Christian imperialist".

2   It is important to note that for some Muslims committed to gender justice there are broader political and epistemological reasons that they refrain from or reject being described as feminist. These scholars and activists politically resist the ways in which "feminism" has become the dominant discourse that can exclusively signal gender equality—a narrowing which they argue foregrounds western genealogies for gender justice (Barlas 2008). Instead, such scholars prefer to define their contributions as simply Islamic or Quranic. There is a strong resistance amongst some Muslim women to the imposed outsider description of their work as "Islamic feminism" when such labeling is primarily about rendering them transparent in terms of the western "other", rather than in their own terms. It appears to me that these kinds of positions generally are more strongly asserted in

politically polarized and Islamophobic contemporary contexts, particularly when specific kinds of western feminist discourse are weaponized to represent "Islam as a misogynist religion" and as such, used to marginalise Muslims minorities. Assertions of epistemological purity often have a significant political freighting and tend to be most acute where identities are conceived of oppositional and exclusive. While foregrounding important political concerns, assertions of feminism as a western discourse neglects the rich histories of African feminisms as well as diverse feminist movements in the larger Global South who claim, define and constitute the range of contemporary feminist positions. Singular narrow representations on the nature of feminism inadvertently and ironically center white and/or imperial feminisms as defining a discourse that in fact currently is constituted by diverse set of theorists and proponents from different parts of the world, and increasingly by scholars from the Global South. Moreover, there are in some contexts, strategic reasons that Muslim gender activists who draw on broader feminist frameworks, refrain from describing their work as "feminist" due to the ways in which such identification might alienate member of their community or be a mechanism of delegitimation by traditional religious figures. For some discussions on retaining distinctions between Islam and feminism, see also (Seedat 2013).

3　In this paper, I am *not* providing an overview of Islamic feminist scholarship as there is a robust literature on this body of knowledge that spans a variety of Muslim discourses. See Al-Sharmani (2014) and Ayubi (2020) for two succinct, sharp mappings of the debates. Jerusha Lamptey's *Divine Words, Female Voices* (Lamptey 2018) provides a comprehensive review and lucid analyses of the contributions of some of the most significant works by Islamic feminists over the last few decades. For an anthology that presents critical and innovative feminist approaches to Islam and gender see Justine Howe's (2020) edited collection entitled *The Routledge Handbook of Islam and Gender*. All of these works provide detailed overviews of the contributions of Islamic feminists to various areas of Muslim thought.

4　I introduced some preliminary explorations of these ideas of Islamic feminism as a friendship within tradition in an earlier article (Shaikh 2021), which I draw on, develop and expand in more detail for this paper.

5　I first saw this phrase casually referred to by Prof Denise Ackermann (2003, p. 47) in describing her relationship to the church. It resonated deeply with my own positionality in relationship to Islam. Denise was also one of my early teachers and friends who taught me a set of feminist analytical skills that were deeply enriching. In honouring her scholarship, I am developing this phrase conceptually for my work.

6　My earlier work was equally inattentive to questions of sexual diversity, an absence that I have become aware of increasingly and am committed to redress.

7　Importantly this formulation enables one to assert the fullness of human agency in the contemporary period as constitutive of tradition—to echo the primary but critical insight by William Cantwell Smith (1962, p. 168) that each believer contributes to the nature of a living tradition which is continually unfolding.

8　In my previous work on the 13th century Sufi, Ibn ʿArabī, I presented my reading of his work as a form of "feminist friendship". (Shaikh 2012, p. 33).

9　Most premodern male Muslim thinkers conceptualized friendships in thoroughly patriarchal, androcentric, classist way, as explored by Zahra Ayubi (2019, pp. 175–207). While fully recognizing these patriarchal historical limitations on concepts of friendship, for my project I am invested in critically drawing on some earlier ideas, while simultaneously reconfiguring friendship in more relevant and gender-inclusive ways.

10　For discussions of how these tensive and ambivalent gender discourses were engaged historically in Sufism, see Shaikh (2012, pp. 41–60). This book also provides a feminist engagement with elements of Sufi thought. For thinking about gender fluidity in the thought of Ibn ʿArabī, see Shaikh (2022).

11　While earlier scholars of Sufism often translated *walāya* as sainthood, a number of contemporary scholars of Sufism made a compelling case to translate the term *walāya* as friendship. Lawson (2016, pp. 19–24) astutely observes that the translation of *walāya* as sainthood represents an orientalist encroachment in the process of translation and that there is a compelling lexical and ethical argument for translating *walāya* as friendship. See also Aiyub Palmer's helpful overview on historical usages of the terms *walāya* and *wilāya*, which were interchangeable in earlier usage but but later *walāya* came to signify spiritual authority while the term *wilāya* was used more so to designate political authority.

12　Lawson (2016, pp. 24–26) provides a detailed outline of the ways in which this term and its semantic range appears in the Quran, noting that the most frequent form is the nominal *walī*, (friend/ally/guardian/protector) occurring 86 times in either singular (*walī*) or plural form (*awliyāʾ*). The abstract verbal noun of *walāya* appears twice in Q.8: 72 and Q18.44.

13　See Aiyub Palmer (2019) detailed and through discussion of development of the terms *wilāya* and *walāya*, and the evolution of these concepts in Muslim history ranging from political authority to spiritual authority.

14　For a range of detailed discussions on notions of *walāya* in Sufism see (Hakim 1995; Cornell 2010; Chodkiewicz 1993; Renard 2008; Palmer 2019).

15　Lawson noting that premodern Sufi conceptions of *walāya* were embedded in and reflective of hierarchical conceptions of the universe, insightfully asks what kinds of Sufi writing might emerge when "written and taught in the context of a relational cosmos rather than a hierarchical one" (Lawson 2016, p. 43). This generative and evocative question is one that I explore through this paper.

16　(Ibn ʿArabī 1985, vol. 1, p. 616). See (Addas 1993, pp. 90–91) for a detailed account of this relationship.

17   There have been several controversies around abuse and spiritual grooming in a few contemporary Sufis communities. See for example Whitehouse (2018) and Waley et al. (2022).

18   For important first-person accounts of spiritual abuse and the misuse of charismatic religious authority see the website *In Shaykhs Clothing*. A particularly powerful contemporary account relevant to this discussion is found here: https://inshaykhsclothing.com/kashf-spiritual-experiences-and-corruption-lessons-and-reflections-from-my-tariqa-experience/ (accessed on 17 July 2023). Another Muslim organization doing trailblazing work against abuse by religious authorities is Facing Abuse in Community Environments (FACE) found at https://facetogether.org/ (accessed on 17 July 2023).

19   There is an increasing public awareness of how some male Sufi teachers have abused their positions to conduct secret marriages with their female students, and the overall ways in which some patriarchal ideas of spiritual authority are detrimental to women. See for example, https://www.npr.org/2019/12/05/784513111/navigating-the-fallout-of-alleged-abuse-and-betrayal-in-a-sacred-muslim-space (accessed on 17 July 2023).

20   See also Sirriyeh (1999) for broader debates on *sharīʿa* and *ṭarīqa* between Sufi groups and other Muslim reformist groups.

21   I am deeply grateful to Prof. Melissa Wilcox, who was a respondent to an earlier version of this paper that I presented as a keynote address to a conference held in Vienna in 2021. I have drawn on her keen and lucid insights on ideas of power and authority in my paper.

22   Such abuses partially initiated a number of internal reforms within Sufi groups particularly in the modern period as documented in Sirriyeh (1999).

23   Shaykh Kabir regularly appears in many leadership fora with his wife Camille Helminski, who is an accomplished writer and practitioner of Sufism in her own right, creating a beautiful model of spousal friendship and shared authority that is noteworthy.

24   Rose Deighton's erudite PhD dissertation (Deighton 2021) explores how contemporary Muslim women Sufi teachers draw on the Muslim tradition while cultivating transformative and egalitarian approaches to gender and human nature. Shaikh (2022) presents a creative reading of Ibn ʿArabī to explore more expansive views of gender fluidity.

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