DIVINE PRESENCE, GENDER, AND THE SUFI SPIRITUAL PATH:
AN ANALYSIS OF RABI’AH THE MYSTIC’S IDENTITY AND POETRY

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
(English)
Xavier University
2009

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DEDICATION
For Joe and Jackson.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The inspiration for this thesis came out of a research paper in Dr. Carol Winkelman’s course, “Women and Sacred Language,” in the fall of 2007. This course opened my eyes to Islam and gender relations in the Qur’an, and I have been enamored with these subjects ever since. It was while taking this class that I believe Rabi’ah found me and my desire to pursue this project emerged.

I greatly appreciate the constructive and insightful guidance of my thesis committee during my research and writing. Whatever merit exists in this work is due primarily to their teaching. Dr. Winkelman carefully read numerous chapter drafts and provided critical comments with great insight and kindness. Her mentorship has indelibly shaped my graduate education at all stages and to say that she has been inspiring would be an understatement. Dr. Graley Herren has given me crucial encouragement for this project in every stage. His insightful words of advice and support always seemed to come at just the right time. Dr. Herren’s advice regarding professional development and the importance of attending academic conferences has proven invaluable. Without his guidance I may not have attended the two conferences that produced crucial scholarly feedback about my research on Rabi’ah.

I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of Dean Janice Walker and the Department of English at Xavier University. The department’s generous assistance helped fund my travels to graduate conferences at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.
and Indiana University. These two conferences provided a forum to present my scholarship on Rabi’ah and engage in collegial discussion about my research. As a result, I came away with new research questions to consider, and these questions undoubtedly influenced the direction of the project and prompted me to further complicate my various arguments.

I owe special thanks to Britt Halvorson, Pat Brennan, Amelia Keller and Kenyari Moore for stimulating conversation and suggestions on earlier drafts of the material, as well as countless gestures of support and friendship along the way. I could write volumes about the latter, but I trust each person knows how grateful I continue to be for his or her friendship. Britt in particular offered me her friendship and advice throughout my three years at Xavier. She asked me thoughtful questions that elicited a more reflective, critical, yet subtle way of approaching material. Pat spent countless hours engaging with my writing and talking through ideas that were in-process. Katherine Nohle, Justin Smith and Christina Black provided helpful advice to me as I began to muddle through the process of writing. Daniel Francis patiently listened to my oral readings of several drafts and offered many kind words of support. My fellow tutors at the James A. Glenn Writing Center, along with Directors Rebecca Todd and Kara Northway, supplied guidance and support throughout the writing process. Finally, Dr. Alison Russell at Xavier University answered numerous questions regarding the entire thesis endeavor, and her knowledge and humor helped me through my graduate education.

The greatest debt I owe is to my family, specifically those who have cared for my son Jackson. I thank my husband Joe for the great gift of his companionship, humor, love, and support with this thesis. His constant sacrifice is deeply felt, and without it this
project would not have been possible. Joe’s encouraging words, positive outlook, and sincere faith in my ability kept me up when writing sometimes got me down. My son Jackson continues to inspire me with his questions and excitement for learning. My mother Deana Metzcar continues to teach me the art of empathy and her compassionate way of approaching the world. Additionally, I would not have successfully completed this thesis without the continual support from Marty Prus, Mary Alice Mulvey, and Deana Metzcar. These three women have consistently made time to care for Jackson, and, as a result of their commitment, I was able to do my work with a clear conscience. I realize that countless sacrifices were made on my behalf by many people—I will always remember their acts of kindness.
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ABSTRACT

In light of the theoretical debate surrounding Qur’anic exegesis and the question of gender egalitarianism, my contribution calls for the (re)interpretation of Rabi’ah the Mystic’s poetry in relation to Qur’anic exegesis on gender relations. I bring to light the intertextuality of Rabi’ah’s spiritual poetry and its relationship to Qur’anic interpretation—as her language is infused (either consciously or unconsciously) with the Qur’an’s prescriptive and marginalizing teachings toward women of her time. By examining her language through a Bakhtinian lens, I investigate how Rabi’ah evokes the heteroglot voices of eighth to ninth-century Basra (or present-day Baghdad, Iraq). I explore three interrelated questions surrounding the construction of her identity: 1) the question of her language as “gendered” or feminine; 2) how scholars have related her identity based on her language and the knowledge of her life passed on through centuries; and 3) how readers may (re)interpret her identity based on the language of her poetry today. Through a textual analysis of the sacred language found within her four poems, I make the following arguments about the inherent multivocality of Rabi’ah’s language: first, Rabi’ah communicates a feminine perspective in much of her poetic language; second, Rabi’ah exhibits normative “masculine” behaviors as her language and lived experience, at times, take on a critical tone typically reserved for the men of her society; and third, Rabi’ah demonstrates an androgynous identity, at various times, through her critique of both the feminized and masculinized paths associated with the Muslim faith.
tradition and Sufism. Thus, Rabi’ah’s discourse and the construction of her identity through the centuries (as portrayed by scholars) produce various discursive effects—both linguistic and cultural. Rabi’ah’s language and experiences, in particular, reveal social mores in the context of eighth-century Muslim society, work to resurrect female voices (as her voice speaks to the female Muslim experience), and illustrate the subjugation of women.
I. Introduction

Issues related to gender hierarchy in the complex faith tradition of Islam have long been a source of contention among scholars, theologians, and worshippers alike. Muslim women, along with feminist scholars, continue to wrestle with the overarching question of how women have reconciled their place (or lack thereof) in the Islamic legacy and managed to carve out space for themselves in a faith tradition steeped in patriarchy. This question is not unique to Islam; in fact, the question of women’s space within the religious sphere remains a primary concern of female worshippers and scholars practicing and studying all major faith traditions—especially given the arguably patriarchal nature of the respective sacred texts. With this in mind, scholars seek out women’s spiritual writing, although limited, that has existed and survived over time in an effort to access how, over the centuries, certain women have managed to create room for themselves within traditions fraught with male-hegemony. Well-known and highly revered female Christian mystics like Julian of Norwich and Theresa of Avila surface as women who used rhetorical strategies and their spiritual positions to both commune with God and transcend certain societal restrictions placed on women at their particular locations in time. Similar to Julian and Theresa, the few but influential female Muslim mystics stand out as anomalies within their community and require in-depth analysis as well.

Examining the role of the female Sufi mystics within the Islamic tradition, I suggest, is worthy of extensive scholarly attention. This study will help us gain insight into the female Muslim experience—an experience largely ignored in the intellectual and spiritual formation of Islam. By focusing on the female Sufi saint Rabi’ah the Mystic, that is, her sacred language and the stories of her life that remain, we may gain access to a
truer Islamic vision. I hope to demonstrate in this thesis how Rabi’ah’s discourse and the
construction of her identity through the centuries (as portrayed by scholars) produce
various discursive effects—both linguistic and cultural. Rabi’ah’s language and
experiences, in particular, reveal social mores in the context of eighth-century Muslim
society, work to resurrect female voices (as her voice speaks to the female Muslim
experience), and illustrate the subjugation of women. I argue that by studying Rabi’ah’s
language and ever-evolving identity, we discover traces of the missing female presence
that will, in turn, contribute to a more authentic Islamic ethos and provide a more
complete picture of the Muslim experience.

In the introductory pages to follow, I will provide an overview of what we know
of Rabi’ah the Mystic, the monastic way of Sufism, and the context of eighth to ninth
century Muslim society. The second chapter will focus on the theoretical basis for my
discussion, and, specifically, Qur’anic issues surrounding gender egalitarianism and
translation. Exhaustive efforts have been made on the part of Islamic feminist theorists to
access both the true Qur’anic message and unread patriarchal interpretations on gender
relations. Many feminist scholars are fighting against the arguably inherent patriarchal
literary authority of the Qur’an—that it has been written by men, for men, and
disseminated to a nearly all-male audience throughout history. The conversation
surrounding the question of Qur’anic gender egalitarianism and the original Qur’anic
message is crucial as it informs my analysis of Rabi’ah’s poetic language and brings the
intertextual nature of her discourse to the fore.

We may ask ourselves: how is studying Rabi’ah’s eighth-century writing and its
discursive effects useful for today? I would argue that her voice, although ancient, is one
of progress—and this is directly connected to how her gender has been portrayed or made (purposefully) ambiguous by others, or more specifically, male exegetes. By studying her language today and recognizing her feminine perspective, we work to reinscribe the female voice and experience into the almost exclusively male, Muslim textual tradition. Chapter four speaks to the above question and investigates the significance of Rabi’ah’s gender (as revealed by others) and addresses the relevance of revisiting and reinterpreting her language and identity in the present day.

When exploring the cumulative legacy of Islam and its various sects and the social practices that have occurred within Muslim contexts throughout time, issues related to gender hierarchy continually surface as a fundamental tension. This is important to remember when examining the role and impact of the Sufi mystics. The Muslim sacred texts typically elevate the man above the woman and early Sufis grounded their practice in the sacred texts, leading one to perceive a patriarchal influence in the writing of the Sufi mystics. However, as Islamic scholar Butorovic relates, some Sufi literature commands men to “be not content to be less than a woman” (Butorovic 142), which illustrates the male Sufi striving to essentially “become woman” in the eyes of God. This places emphasis on the feminized union that Muslims may achieve with God—between a lover (male) and the beloved (female). In his writing, the great Sufi master Ibn ‘Arabi insists that “God is seen more perfectly…in woman than in man,” yet he ultimately suggests that because “woman came from man” this gender hierarchy occurs (Butorovic 142; my emphasis). Here we notice a tension between the feminized spiritual path of the mystic and his/her union with God (much of which is based on gender as socially defined at the time), and the idea that the foundations of Sufi teachings
lie in the Qu’ran and hadiths, where the male is often interpreted as favored over the female.¹ This paradox, which will be more fully revealed in the subsequent chapters, serves as one example of the many contradictions that permeate the Muslim world and Islamic tradition.

In light of the contradictions touched upon above concerning gender relations in Islam, I investigate how the Muslim mystic, Rabi’ah, embodies a counter-hegemonic role and successfully navigates the male-dominated society of eighth to ninth century Basra (or present-day Baghdad, Iraq). I uncover how her writing illustrates the negotiation of her role as a woman within that particular society and time. Additionally, her writing and lived experience also works to critique the treatment of women in the male-dominated society in which she exists. I endeavor to explore three interrelated questions surrounding the construction of her identity: 1) the question of her language as “gendered” or feminine; 2) how scholars have related her identity based on her language and the knowledge of her life passed on through centuries; and 3) how readers may (re)interpret her identity based on the language of her poetry today. Through a textual analysis of the sacred language found within her four poems, I make the following interrelated arguments about the inherent multivocality of Rabi’ah’s language: first, Rabi’ah communicates a feminine perspective in much of her poetic language; second, her language and lived experience, at times, take on a critical tone typically reserved for the men of her society; and third, Rabi’ah demonstrates an androgynous identity through her critique of both the feminized and masculinized paths associated with the Muslim

¹ Serenity Young defines hadith as “collections of anecdotes about the life of Muhammad which serve as guides for Muslim religious practices and jurisprudence that are not covered directly or fully by the Qur’an” (105). Additionally, Muslim scholars, throughout time, have developed a system for determining the accuracy of hadiths—that hadith have been “preserved through various reliable sources” (Young 105).
faith tradition and Sufism. I discuss Rabi’ah’s primary biographer, ‘Attar, his portrayal of her gender as ambiguous, and offer a concession for this description. Additionally, I acknowledge the ambiguities and complications that arise when studying Rabi’ah, her poetic language, and the course of her life, as it has been documented since her death. Hence Rabi’ah’s poetry conveys a sacred voice infused (either consciously or unconsciously) with the Qur’an’s prescriptive and marginalizing teachings toward women of her time. I determine through an analysis of her spiritual poetry and her elevated spiritual status within the Sufi sect that Rabi’ah carves out a place for herself in Muslim society. She negotiates a middle ground between the contradictions that I analyze within this paper that center on gender relations in the Qur’an, Sufi thought, and eighth-century Muslim society.

Before we can understand the thrust of the tensions described above, it is necessary to grasp the original meaning of Sufism, how followers have constructed a Sufi way of life, and both the manifestations and underpinnings of the tradition. The actual word, “suf,” meaning “wool” was first used to identify those wearing woolen garments. Karamustafa connects the term to the Sufi movement by explaining that “‘wool-wearer” came to carry the connotation of “‘devoted, radical renunciant/mystic’” (7). The terms “Sufi” and “Sufism” originate in Arabic and exist in early Islamic texts, and although the actual dressing in wool garments became insignificant, Sufism evolved to communicate “devotees of a particular type of piety” (6). With this in mind, the Sufi’s of Baghdad (or Basra) are characterized by the “…training and domestication of the lower self through appropriate measures that included the continuous cultivation of the heart and, for many but not all Sufis, asceticism as well as [elective] poverty” (Karamustafa 19).
pinnacle goal of the Sufi was oneness with the Beloved, or “heavenly gnosis (ma‘rifa),” which came only from spiritual experience (Smith 20). However, as this union supposedly left no distinction between the sexes, the gendered relationship of lover and beloved (male and female) is still used to describe the Sufi’s relationship with God.

Let us now clarify the relationship of (radical) Sufism to mainstream (orthodox) Islam. On the whole, Muslim theologians have opposed the Sufi movement (especially female Sufi saints), and Sufis seem to have found the spiritual experience of mainstream Islam less than satisfactory as well. The Sufi mystics offer us an alternative interpretation of an authentic Islamic vision: one that recognizes and upholds the sacred texts, but understands the “ephemeral” quality of Muhammad’s teachings—that his teachings were specific practices in response to a certain social reality in the formative stages of Islam (Ahmed 65). Ahmed argues that the Sufi movement was shunned by the orthodoxy from the beginning of the movement and deemed “heretical” until stripped of its more radical elements (65). Rabi’ah is situated in and contributed to the development of the early, more radical form of Sufism that embarked upon some of the most extreme ascetic practices possible (Schimmel 285). Schimmel distinguishes that Sufis “went back beyond the institutionalized, rigorously legalistic framework of orthodox Islam” (285). Over time, Muslim theologians have opposed the Sufi movement (especially female Sufi saints) and “approved neither of the practices nor of the poetical symbols of the Sufis (Schimmel 284).

Originally in opposition to each other, the progression of Sufism serves to recognize both the Sufi path (tariqa) and social path of Islam (sharia) as complementary and as eventually reflecting the “inward and outward manifestations of Truth” (Butorovic
Sufism may be examined through three distinct historical phases: the early phase, the formative phase, and the eleventh century. Born during the eighth century, Rabi’ah witnesses and contributes to the first phase of Sufism, a period marked by its “ground[ing] in the Scriptural tradition” that “gains new ascetic momentum antithetical to the corruption and wealth of the expanding Islamic empire” (Butorovic 140). Rabi’ah’s poetry received more recognition in the formative period of the ninth and tenth centuries which “saw the rise of Sufi literature and a gradual systemization of Sufi thought” (Butorovic 140). We may assume that her poetry gained more attention after her death in 801, and during this formative stage, when stories of her life would have spread and worked to inspire other mystics and influence devotional practices. Through her powerful spiritual poetry, Rabi’ah played a role in connecting the tariqa and sharia, thus shaping believers’ understandings and practices of Islam.

To begin to understand Rabi’ah the Mystic and her sacred language, we must establish her place in society, her spiritual authority, and explore how her character has been portrayed—both today and throughout history. Rabi’ah al-Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya existed as a unique, influential female figure in Muhammadan Muslim society, and deciphering her “true” identity remains a topic of contention today. Considered the first saint of Islam, Rabi’ah is arguably the most famous Sufi mystic (McDonough 172). Although it is difficult to know the details of her life with precision, Rabi’ah definitely existed as a historical female figure (Karamustafa 1).

In Muslim Women Mystics, Margaret Smith—regarded as one of Rabi’ah’s most credible biographers—acknowledges the discrepancy surrounding Rabi’ah’s identity as a

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2 Smith asserts that the Sufi’s give to a woman, namely Rabi’ah, “first place among the earliest Muhammadan mystics and have chosen her to represent the first development of mysticism in Islam” (21).
slave and the speculation that she belonged to a noble family of Basra (22). Many reliable scholars claim that she was orphaned at a young age and sold into slavery (and eventually released due to her incredible piety). In line with this claim, Butorovic believes that Rabi’ah endured suffering and loneliness which, subsequently, led her to God and influenced her life philosophy (144). Smith contends that her lack of “known parentage,” in fact, points to a life of slavery (7). The debate surrounding Rabi’ah’s tribal status and class background is worth noting because this information has and does affect scholars’ interpretation of her subjugation and identity. For example, if her life history includes slavery and lower-class status, Rabi’ah circumvents the socially mandated rule of male guardian. Her difficult beginnings contribute to the lack of traceable family origins in her post-emancipation life (discussed in-depth in chapters two and three). As a result, we consider the implications surrounding gender and social oppression as it pertains to one who has no family to speak of due to her slave experience, and this will be explored later in chapter five. In contrast, upper-class women were more strictly observed and guided by male relatives (guardians). When considering Rabi’ah, her life, and spiritual poetry in the context of this discussion, I will assume that she was, indeed, a slave during her early years.

In the same vein, Leila Ahmed calls attention to Rabi’ah’s “very poor origin” and experience as a slave (68). Ahmed relays how “a female slave or servant scarcely had the option of renouncing many worldly attractions” (68). Thus, Sufism “offered the possibility of a life of independence and autonomy otherwise certainly impossible for women, particularly women of Rabi’ah’s class” (68). In other words, the Sufi tradition provided Rabi’ah—a former slave and member of the lower-class—with a life of freedom
from the societal constraints surrounding Muslim women to pursue her relationship with God unopposed. Rabi’ah experienced both physical and spiritual emancipation.

In addition to her rise from slavery and the subsequent shaping of her life and identity as a result of her difficult beginnings, Rabi’ah’s iconic status is rooted in the authority that she held during her life. Smith relates how Rabi’ah is considered, throughout time, by virtually all great Sufi teachers, to be of “the highest authority” (71). Due to her perceived authority as a Sufi mystic, many major writers of Sufi doctrine and treatise throughout time include Rabi’ah’s teachings in their main doctrines (Smith 71). This is important to note because her authority works to define her counter-cultural position as a powerful and revered Muslim woman in eighth-ninth century society. However, it is crucial to recognize that although Rabi’ah was heard and recognized throughout time, her gender was depicted as “androgynous” or “ambiguous” (specifically by her aforementioned primary biographer, ‘Attar, in the tenth-century). By reinterpreting her discourse and identity today, we hear her voice (among other voices) and acknowledge her female gender as relevant.

Further, possibly the most telling indicator of Rabi’ah’s authority involves her lack of a personal guardian or sheikh. Smith emphasizes that, “It is to be noted that we do not hear of Rabi’a[h] herself learning from any great sheikh or teacher” (71). As I will investigate further in chapter three in relation to her poetic language, the implication that God is Rabi’ah’s only guardian reinforces her existence as a force within her faith. Upton associates her post-emancipation independence with her early hardships, namely her time as a slave, and argues that by the time her name took on a holy connotation, her character was largely formed as a result of these life trials (14). Thus, why would she
take on a sheikh (or husband for that matter) when she needed only God to sustain her during the most challenging times of her life? If Rabi’ah had a relative serving as her guardian, it is likely that she would have experienced less freedom and would have been expected to marry (Smith 7). Interestingly, Rabi’ah functions without a male guardian and is said to have had many followers and disciples that sought her influence day and night (Smith 32). According to Smith, Rabi’ah’s two primary servants—Miriam of Basra and ‘Abda vint Shuwal—loved her, followed her, and cared for her (36-37). Although we cannot accurately compile her life story, Rabi’ah’s spiritual authority comes through in her ability to exist independent of a male guardian, and, instead, lead disciples on the Sufi path (of whom the majority were men) (Smith 36). As we strive to fill in the gaps of literary history—resurrecting subjugated female voices—Rabi’ah’s language and life experiences are extremely relevant to this endeavor, and her influence on the Muslim faith (as well as other traditions) extends to today.

Rabi’ah embraces all three major elements of Sufism, “pietism, asceticism, and mysticism,” in her quest to achieve union with the Divine (Ahmed 65). Specifically, Rabi’ah focused her spirituality on the “discovery and cultivation of the inner dimensions of the human person” and, like other Sufi mystics, showcased paranormal abilities (Karamustafa 1). Frequently foregoing food and sleep, Rabi’ah engaged in practices that included fasting by day and standing to worship at night. Due to the intense level of spiritual devotion and (in her case) the pursuit of a nomadic lifestyle, the Sufi mystical tradition offered Rabi’ah an alternative path to the typical role of a Muslim wife, especially when considering that the role of a Muslim wife was commonly understood as a religious obligation (Butorovic 143). Thus, it comes as no surprise that as a female
renunciant of early Sufism, Rabi’ah received more social scrutiny than her numerous male contemporaries (Butorovic 143).

When considering the gender composition of Sufism, one observes the strong male following that continued to grow from the early phase of Sufism through the eleventh century. Amila Butorovic discusses how the Sufi path became “increasingly male oriented,” where the androcentric followers “thrived on stories about the formation of erotic and spiritual bonds among the participating men” (Butorovic 140). It is important to note, then, how Rabi’ah’s status as a prominent female figure, and one of few female renunciants of the time, contrasts with the growing number of male followers. Yet, with this said, Sufism did provide women with a unique alternative to their typical social role, as well as with a form of “spiritual empowerment” (Butorovic 140).

Butorovic explains how “women mystics maneuvered their way through the discursive ambivalence toward the socially weaker sex, expressed as affirmation and negation, rejection and infatuation, enchantment and disenchantment” (141). These dualities—“affirmation and negation” and “rejection and infatuation”—highlight the enigmatic female role at this time. The dualities relayed by Butorovic parallel the tension between the highly feminized path of the Sufi mystic and the implications of a male-dominated society. Interestingly, despite the prominent male participation, the Sufi mystical path and experience became increasingly symbolized as feminine, and some scholars point to Rabi’ah as the source of this shift (Butorovic 142). Thus, Rabi’ah exists as a female pioneer among a growing number of male Sufi contemporaries, influences the perception of the Sufi spiritual path, and (through her devotion to God and poetic language)
simultaneously highlights and deconstructs the social constraints indicative of her socio-cultural location.

To fully grasp the gender dynamic at work in this society we must further explore the climate of Rabia’h’s speculated birthplace, Basra (or present-day Baghdad, Iraq), and the relationship between society and scripture. In essence, Rabia’h lived in a society dominated by men. Sheila McDonough explains that “the codification of Islamic law under the Abbasids meant that gender relations among Muslims had been more systemized and formal” than pre-Islamic Arab society, or before 622 C.E. (McDonough 170). Therefore, a patriarchal interpretation of the Qur’an (and subsequent application of this interpretation) allowed for the societal marginalization of women. This also implies that believers’ practice and lifestyle did not reflect the “ethical imperatives to equality” that are thought to have been part of the “original Qur’anic message” (McDonough 171).

Male leaders typically took on female concubines and men generally understood women as “inferior, irrational beings…that men must control” (McDonough 171). Women became a commodity in some cases, and furthermore, could be traded as property: “Women were easily bought and sold,” in response to “…the widespread ideas that women were fragile, incompetent, and unreliable” (171). This understanding of gender may have influenced the scholars who collected hadith reports and wrote Shariah codes (McDonough 170), demonstrating the ability for Muslim societal constructions of gender to shape their religious codes. In summary, just as patriarchal interpretations of the Qur’an and hadiths influence social constructions of gender, the presence of these roles in society may also affect the formative processes of religious tenets. One may argue that in spite of original “ethical imperatives to equality,” the Muslim scripture allows for the
inferiority of women; yet, as a result, the practice of devaluing women, in turn, influences the composition of later religious texts.

This process of (re-)contextualization places Rabi’ah within a distinct textual and historical milieu. Thus when examining her spiritual poetry we must consider the unresolved tensions that involve the patriarchal interpretation of the Qur’an, the historical perspective of eighth to ninth century Muslim society in Basra, and the feminized path of the Sufi mystic—that man should “become woman” in the eyes of God. Through the unfolding of this thesis, we see issues related to gender hierarchy in Islam and the feminized Sufi path complicated further: Rabi’ah (like other female mystics) already occupies a female role—one that is considered submissive in society. Despite the ways in which Rabi’ah manages to work around societal constraints, she still occupies a specific social role that places her in submission to both God and man. In effect, inhabiting this role works to impact Rabi’ah’s piety and access to God. I would argue that, due to the social role in which she inhabits—as a female in eighth-century Muslim society—Rabi’ah is inherently indoctrinated into a submissive, “beloved” role with the divine; and, as a result, relating to the Divine in gendered terms may be more instinctual for Rabi’ah than her male counterpart.

By uncovering what is known (or speculated about) Rabi’ah’s life history, one recognizes the prominent elements of Rabi’ah’s character—her asceticism, extreme piety, and desire for isolation—which will be explored further in chapter three’s analysis of her spiritual poetry. By reviewing the principle tenets of Sufism and the common gender composition of these worshippers, Rabi’ah’s elevated position among fellow Sufis stands in stark contrast to these given ideals. The mystic lifestyle offers Rabi’ah an alternative
life from the typical female experience, and, she destabilizes the pervasive, normative female role through her piety and spiritual authority. In essence, Rabi’ah’s writing functions as a tool of agency and addresses issues of gender and male hegemony embedded within the spiritual and cultural sphere in which she is located.

This discussion indicates that although influential in her time, patriarchal literary authority and male-hegemonic forces in eighth-century Muslim society overshadowed Rabi’ah’s relevance. The presentation of her gender as ambiguous or androgynous was necessary to ensure her credibility in the eyes of an almost exclusively male audience. Due to the cultural constraints of the time and the social practice of elevating men above women, Rabi’ah’s full impact could not be understood. Yet, by reinterpreting her poetic language and identifying her feminine presence today, we seek to resurrect the female voices lost in the formation of Islam.

II. Theoretical Framework

In recent decades the perpetual debate over Qur’anic interpretation and reinterpretation, specifically with regard to gender relations as revealed within the sacred text, has dominated much of contemporary Islamic feminist theory. Both the treatment and expectations of women in the Qur’an persist as points of contention for Islamic scholars and theorists—and exhaustive efforts have been made by Islamic feminists to re-read the Qur’an and “unread” patriarchal interpretations. This resistance to male hegemony, specifically within the religious sphere, is not a new endeavor, nor is the desire for feminists to fill the empty spaces of literary history an issue that has been resolved.
Before we embark upon this topic of much contention, it is important to examine how Islamic feminists themselves define “feminism.” In an effort to de-politicize the idea of feminism and locate its primary function as that which “seeks justice,” Cooke describes the concept as a mental state or consciousness:

It is above all an attitude, a frame of mind that highlights the role of gender in understanding the organization of society. Feminism provides the analytical tools for assessing how expectations for men’s and women’s behavior have led to unjust situations, particularly but not necessarily only for women. Feminism provides a crosscultural prism through which to identify moments of awareness that something is wrong in the expectations for women’s treatment or behavior, of rejection of such expectations, and of activism to effect some kind of change (143; her emphasis).

This definition does not focus on political activism as the primary means towards change but presents feminism as an outlook, a “frame of mind.” This ideological shift encourages men and women to reflect on expectations of behavior, the gender injustices that have occurred and continue to occur, and, ideally, positively influence our behavior. Cooke argues that feminism must be transnational and therefore not “bound to one culture” (143). Conversely, Esack discusses “gender justices” in a “culturally specific [context] and [to] avoid a supposed universal feminist discourse” (188). I bring this to light to showcase the various ways that, even within one interpretive community, defining “feminism”

3 Esack’s definition of “gender justice” extends beyond “what men owe to women” and includes human rights and justice for all—regardless of sexuality, race, religion, etc. He makes the point that the world is “not neatly divided up into men and women,” and although his essay on “Islam and Gender Justice” focuses on male and female relations within Islam and the Qur’an, he extends this notion of justice to all individuals (188).
differs from one scholar to another. Cooke’s definition in comparison with Esack’s critique demonstrates the inconsistencies in how “feminist” scholars perceive and relate the very concept of feminism, and this informs the range of interpretive approaches to the Qur’an that I will explore in the discussion to follow. We cannot ignore Esack’s gender as male and must acknowledge how, even in feminist discourse where male scholars strive to correct their misperceptions, these men continue to occupy the social role as men. In sum, the construction of feminism among Islamic feminists interpreting the Qur’an reciprocally shapes and is influenced by their understandings of “patriarchal literary authority” and “male hegemony” in the texts. It seems that a range of ways of locating this quality exists, too, in the text and will be reinforced in my later argument regarding translation.

I would like to highlight several key findings of the large body of literature on the hermeneutical study of gender relations in the Qur’an within feminist discourse, and consider the implications of this study when analyzing Rabi’ah’s poetic language. Examining the Qur’an and its ever-evolving exegesis is a process inherently based upon context (maqām), internal relationships or “intertextuality,” and the act of translation (Haleem 158). Yet, this process has been anachronistically applied and is fraught with male hegemony, or patriarchal literary authority within the text (Traub 30; Esack 190-193). Although different factions of Islam take various positions on Qur’anic literalism, the text is widely regarded as the “direct word of God” divinely revealed to the Prophet Mohammed (Ferguson 93; Peach 249-50; Wadud “Alternative” 4). Consequently, throughout the existence of the faith Muslims have attempted strictly to adhere to the sacred text and its perceived “truths.” In connection to Islam as a whole and over the
span of centuries, the Qur’an has been constructed as the great unifier: the “common identification, their cultural nation” (Cooke 149). Because Islam, along with Christianity and Judaism, is a predominately textual religion, the Qur’an has been held in great esteem, yet simultaneously (re)examined, (re)interpreted, and debated since its revelation.

Qur’anic exegesis is an inherently subjective practice and scholars have often wrestled with the seemingly contradictory statements within the sacred text and its “original” message. While most Islamic scholars agree that the original, overarching Qur’anic message is one that encourages a just society and “sense of compassion for all victims of oppression” (Esack 190), the reader/exegete of the text (whether consciously or unconsciously) imparts his or her own socio-historical perspective and clouds a “true” and unarguable reading of the text (Wadud “Qur’anic View” 32; 35-36). Consequently, scholars and believers of any faith tradition may alter or influence the religion in some way just as they “share in its inherited shame or glory” (Esack 191). I will call the cumulative effect of this practice a “religious collective consciousness,” with the intention of relating the way each scholar may construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct Qur’anic messages in an effort to (re)shape the tradition. This point is crucial to my research. Scholars’ interest in the question of Qur’anic “gender egalitarianism” demonstrates their desire to transform ideas about gender justice within the Muslim faith. In the same vein, the consistent analysis and reinterpretation of Rabi’ah’s character, gender, and poetic language over time reinforces her presence in the faith and her role in

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4 When I employ the term “gender egalitarianism,” I am referring to the way that Islamic scholars and theorists investigate whether or not the sacred texts (and specifically the Qur’an) inherently promote gender equality. Thus some writers argue that the text promotes gender justices and has been only interpreted as patriarchal in nature.
the religious collective consciousness that serves to redefine gender relations and Islamic identity.

The ongoing debate surrounding gender justice in the Qur’an places theorists in multiple camps and positions. Although these scholars address similar issues in question, they do so in slightly different ways. Writers such as Ferguson and Peach clearly define Islam as a “strongly patriarchal tradition,” and they point to the Qur’an as both the source and enabler of this reality (Ferguson 93). Yet Peach admits that in comparison to pre-Muslim Arabia, the Qur’an is quite progressive toward women, providing them with more rights than previously granted in sixth-century Arab culture (252). Although she asserts that the Qur’an’s overarching message is “revealing God’s will for humanity to create a just society and institute a variety of social reforms, including the status of women,” this must be considered in relation to the context and relative comparison of women’s status—i.e., the text is far from egalitarian. Peach, as well as Ferguson, makes it clear that she reads the Qur’an as patriarchal in nature, application, and interpretation—a text that has been written by men, for men, and to elevate men (Peach 252-3; Ferguson 93). According to Peach, women may have gained more rights than previously held in society; yet, according to the Qur’an, they are still inferior as evidenced by the text’s prescriptions regarding divorce, marital rights, property rights, and inheritance (252).

Although approaching Qur’anic exegesis from a similar analytical angle, Ferguson focuses on the perpetuation of male-domination in world religions by way of “alienation myths” that blame women for disease, suffering, death, etc. Investigating Islamic scripture with this notion in mind unveils the consistent theme—both implicit and explicit—in the Qur’an’s treatment of gender relations that reinforces the man’s role as
one who reacts or responds to the woman and/or her behavior (Q. 4:19; 4:34-5). This assigns male actors a heightened degree of agency in scriptural passages. The text then assumes that the woman will behave wrongly and, this in and of itself, alludes to the notion that women are to blame for many ills of society. Although these alienation myths (which are arguably embedded in both the messages and tone of the Qur’an) may seem anachronistic to the modern-day individual, the effects of these myths have persisted through centuries and enabled the subjugation of women (Ferguson 75). Although Wadud does not read the scripture as inherently patriarchal, she does concur with Ferguson that neotraditionalists, especially, continue to read and apply misconstrued Qur’anic messages to “lived Islam” and define the Muslim woman “only in terms relative to the man’s home: a pious or recalcitrant wife, mother, daughter, or homemaker” (4). Again, this reinforces the point that, whether in the text itself or the interpretation of the text in social practice, women are and have been defined in relation to men and their spaces. Peach backs up Ferguson’s claim that gender is and has been a “central concern of Islam” due to the number of Qur’anic passages concerning women’s bodies, their sexuality and reproductive capabilities, and the emphasis on “how men should behave in relation to women” (Peach 252; my emphasis). Thus, Wadud, Peach and Ferguson agree that Qur’anic interpretation has served to “regulate women’s lives” and “order Islamic society as a whole through categories based on gender” (Peach 251). Whether by viewing the woman as man’s liability, property or responsibility, or spatially in relation to the man, much of Qur’anic exegesis places the woman in a secondary or relative role to their male counterpart.
Coming from more of an ontological perspective, theorists such as Barlas and Wadud have called for an “unreading” of the patriarchal interpretation of the Qur’an, blaming in some senses the Western interpretive lens and our ever-present ideas of binaries for the (perceived) patriarchal read. In essence, those individuals operating from a Western ideological framework have internalized the “two sex model” and tend to “impute gender dualisms to sex” over time (Barlas 131). In contrast, Barlas argues that the epistemological nature of the Qur’an is not one that privileges the male or “traditional patriarchal imaginaries” (129). Instead, Barlas asserts, “…not only does the Qur’an not define women and men in terms of binary oppositions, but that it also does not portray women as lesser or defective men, or the two sexes as incompatible, incommensurable, or unequal, in the tradition of western/ized patriarchal thought” (129-130). Barlas makes the case that, in the Qur’an, humans “originated in a single Self [nafs], have been endowed with the same natures, and make up two halves of a single pair,” (133; Wadud “Qur’anic View” 34). Similarly, Wadud states that there is no “concept of woman” in the Qur’an, as there is no concept of “gendered man” either (xxi; her emphasis). Barlas insists that when examining the original language of the Qur’an and the context in which it was revealed, “being male or female does not in itself suggest a particular meaning” (165). According to Barlas and Wadud, regardless of the ideas that persist regarding Muslim women and their bodies, we cannot blame the Qur’an itself for discriminating social practices regarding gender roles or inequalities.

As Islamic feminist theorists such as Wadud and Barlas reinterpret the Qur’an as gender-balanced, Cooke writes that these feminists (in favor of rereading the scripture in this light) are “objecting to the fact that the Qur’an has been interpreted and history has
been recorded and passed down almost exclusively by men” (146). These writers, like Wadud and Barlas, blame this patriarchal interpretation of the text, or patriarchal literary authority, for the social practices that have (and continue to) marginalize women.

Cooke’s statement applies across the board to include Western and Eastern (mis)interpretation, while Wadud seems to focus exclusively on Eastern interpretation. Wadud identifies the “…overwhelming tendency in the Islamic historical legacy….for men to tell women how to be women!” (Wadud “Alternative” 14). Consequently, although scholars such as Wadud and Barlas reinterpret the true Qur’anic message as one with inherent gender parity, that does not change men’s subjugation women throughout the history of Islam.

I agree with Cooke’s statement regarding the common motivations that drive many Islamic scholars looking to create what Wadud refers to as a new and authentic Islamic identity—one that attempts to resurrect the female voices that have been lost in the intellectual formation of Islam and fill the historical gaps that have served to subjugate women (Wadud “Alternative” 14). Wadud writes: “Those that propose that all that can be said about Islam, about the Qur’an, or even in shari’ah has been said already intentionally or unintentionally support this historical absence of women’s articulations, rendering women objects of men’s fancy and utility” (“Alternative” 19). Her answer to this ongoing injustice lies in the continual reinterpretation of the Qur’an as the focal and primary source of Islam that, from her view, hinges on “equality and equity” (Qur’an 4:32; 33:35; Wadud “Alternative” 20), and to construct “lived Islam” as a dynamic and mutable practice of “engaged surrender” (Wadud “Alternative” 11).
This change in approaching and practicing the faith, holistically, will challenge the intellectual developments that have persisted regarding the place and respect of women (Wadud “Alternative” 20). Wadud’s point not only illustrates the way that surrender has been associated with the female in Qur’anic interpretation and reinterpretation (and, though what is crucially in dispute, perhaps in the sacred text itself), but also relates how engaged surrender is necessary to any lived Muslim experience, however gendered. In accordance with my larger argument, Wadud contends that the perspective and practice of “engaged surrender is not new or unique” because it has “historical precedent among the Sufis, or Muslim mystics” (“Alternative” 11). The notion of “engaged surrender” will resurface in my analysis of Rabi’ah’s poetry and revealed character in the chapters to follow. Consequently, by studying Rabi’ah’s language and ever-evolving identity, we discover traces of the missing female presence that will, in turn, contribute to a more authentic Islamic ethos and provide a more complete picture of the Muslim experience.

Farid Esack, a committed Muslim man and theologian, concurs with virtually all other scholars that the original Qur’anic message was one that encouraged “a sense of gender justice” (190). Overall, Esack determines that until Muslim men, as well as women, work towards a kind of gender justice that is based on their fundamental responsibility to humanity, they will remain in bondage (189). Like Wadud’s argument, I find Esack’s argument progressive and compelling as he suggests a teleological lens for gender inequality and focuses more on (re)reading the Qur’an in the context of contemporary society and for the needs of worshippers today. By no means does Esack attempt to ignore what he sees as inherent gender inequalities within the scripture; yet, he
describes the Muslim transcendent as above all—including Islam and the text—and any
“socioreligiopolitical” systems or ways of being (204). Therefore, although divinely
revealed, the human quality that is associated with the Qur’an and its interpretation
renders the text inferior to Allah.

Esack also offers insight into unresolved tensions between “text and context” in
the Qur’an concerning the question of gender parity. He writes: “one discerns a strong
egalitarian trend when the Qur’an deals with ethico-religious responsibilities and
recompense of the believers, but at the same moment a discriminatory trend when it deals
with the social and legal obligations of women” (192-193). In short, passages relating to
social and legal situations appear to sanction discrimination against women; yet, as Esack
explains, those pertaining to religious responsibility treat men and women equally.
Building from the previous mention of the text’s inferiority to Allah due to its human
component, the passages relating to social situations appear more distant from Allah and,
in turn, prone to greater misinterpretation. In addition, Esack calls for all Muslim
theologians to use multiple hermeneutical devices, even abrogation, “to arrive at an
interpretation that serves the ends of justice” (191). By pointing to the ways that the
Qur’an falls short of endorsing gender justice, Esack soberly yet hopefully acknowledges
the contradictory voices that permeate his understanding of Islam and the Qur’an, as well
as the Muslim world (188-9). Just as Esack draws out the unresolved tensions in the
scripture in an effort to expose the harsh injustices and rectify them in the present, we
may also better understand those same voices in contention through analysis of Rabi’ah’s
spiritual poetry. With men as the “essential” Qur’anic audience and hegemonic
interlocutors within the faith, Rabi’ah and her poetic language interject both a female
presence into Muslim textual tradition and become mediating voices in Muslim experience.

Before further exploring Rabi’ah’s language in connection to the larger question at hand, I find it necessary to identify and address the crux of the debate surrounding gender egalitarianism in the Qur’an. Much of the tension lies in the exegesis of Surah II and the translated meanings of “zawj” and “qawwāmūna.” In response to the debate, I offer two different translations of a passage of much deliberation:

1.) Men (zawj) have authority over women or because God has made the one superior to the other (qawama), and because they spend their wealth to maintain them.5 Good women (salihat) are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because God has guarded them. As for those whom you fear disobedience (nushuz), admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them. God is high, supreme (Surah 2: 221-222).

2.) Men are qawwamun (the Protectors and maintainers) of/over (‘ala) women, Because God has faddala (preferred some of them over others), and because they support them from their means. Therefore the salihat (righteous) women are qanitat (devoutly obedient), And guard in their husbands’ absence what God would have them guard. As to those women on whose part you fear nushuz (ill conduct/disobedience), Admonish them, refuse to share their beds and beat them

5 Haleem asks: “Why does the verse not say ‘husbands and wives’? Because the word zawj (which in modern Arabic means “husband”) applies in classical Arabic to both sexes. It has no feminine; it is like the English word ‘spouse,’ and, [Haleem argues], it would not have made sense to say ‘spouses are given more than spouses’” (47).
But if they return again to obedience seek not means against them for God is the most high, Great above you (Q. 4:34).

Scholars such as Ferguson, Peach, and Esack read these verses as placing men a degree above women and instructing women to obey the men who provide for them (Peach 253; Ferguson 93; Esack 200). Yet Haleem and Barlas argue that due in large part to mistranslation and a “conservative-patriarchal exegesis” (Barlas 160), this verse has been misconstrued and misappropriated throughout time (Haleem 47). Haleem claims that over a dozen words are misinterpreted in the translation from Arabic to English, and for example, that the word *zawj* is gender-neutral in ancient Arabic, similar to the word *spouse* in English (47). He writes: “…those who misunderstand the verse take it to mean that God has given ‘men’ in general ‘more than women’ in general, applying that very extensively and interpolating what they think men are given more of” (47). Barlas would agree with Haleem’s sentiments due to the idea that men are not privileged in the Qur’an as both men and women originated from one *nafs* or a single self (Barlas 133-134).

Further, by lexically examining the Arabic term *qawama*, (found in the original Arabic version of the verse) Haleem determines its meaning as “stewardship.” In response to this definition, Haleem translates the first verse in Surah 2:221 as, “Men maintain and attend to their wives because God has assigned this extra role to them and because of what they spend of their money on the family” (50). He claims that *qawama* essentially communicates man’s responsibility to “maintain her and attend to her affairs,” rather than to protect them or “have authority over them” (Haleem 48). In essence, he cites God’s agency as assigning man’s role as “steward,” not placing him above woman—that is, man dutifully lives out his assigned role according to a divine
All throughout his essay on “Marriage and Divorce” Haleem attempts to rectify what is arguably a clear patriarchal superiority within the Qur’anic text. Yet he continually focuses on how the man is discussed throughout the Qur’an and the man’s response to his “good” or “bad” wife. Interestingly, within this practice of continually prioritizing the male and subverting the female, I would argue that Haleem himself ultimately reinscribes this inherent patriarchy.

The other major issue in the Qur’an related to gender relations deals with the permitted “beating” of wives: “…and you may hit them” (Q. 4:34). Barlas states that overall the Qur’an “…does not condone the abuse of wives” (165), and I agree with Barlas that, as a whole, the Qur’anic message is one that endorses kindness between spouses (Barlas 165; Q. 7:189; Q. 30:21). With this said, however, the sparse mentions of “beating” or “hitting” continue to be exploited by Muslim men, and as a result, remain problematic. Islamic scholars like Haleem remind the reader that we must consider the scripture intertextually, in its entirety, and specifically with regard to how the Prophet himself treated his multiple wives (50-53). Because no existing evidence finds the Prophet culpable of abuse, Haleem argues, the Muslim man should consider this as their model for behavior. This encourages the husband to think through any physical action and not act in a hasty or unjust manner. Haleem stresses that only after the first two steps are taken—“reminding [the wife in question] of God and his teachings” and a verbal boycott (but only) in bed—and proven ineffective, may the husband exercise this last resort of “beating” (Haleem 53). Although the Prophet is said to have stated “the best of you are those that are best in treating their wives” (Haleem 53), and he questioned those men who beat their wives and then slept with them, I maintain that the mere permission
to beat them—regardless of circumstance—points to a patriarchal force within the text. Scholars can attempt to clarify, like Haleem that “all Muslim exegetes agree that the husband is not allowed to beat the wife severely,” but the fact remains that husbands have been granted permission to physically abuse their wives (53-4).\(^6\) I understand the limitations of translation but would argue that these passages absolutely do not promote gender justice and may be understood as irreconcilable. Hence, by employing Esack’s suggested practice of “progressive revelation,” female worshippers may apply strategies such as abrogation in the scripture in an attempt to claim equality with men (206).

Overall, we notice how Islamic theorists utilize various means—whether through epistemological (re)reading of the scripture, historical contextualization, or simply applied abrogation—in pursuit of the same goal: to establish gender justice in the Muslim world. Although it appears that most contemporary Islamic theorists desire this same outcome, the question of gender egalitarianism located within the scripture endures within Islamic theory. As Cooke points out: “Islam as a religion may evolve and change as interpretations of its texts proliferate, but the sources of these interpretations remain intact” (147; her emphasis). Whether or not the original Qur’anic message intended to elevate the male above the female, this social practice has occurred, and many contemporary Islamic feminists’ efforts stem from their desire to reconcile this perceived wrong. In short, however contested Qur’anic messages may be, virtually all scholars agree that both the Islamic theological and legal tradition and Muslim cultural life are rooted in gender injustices and some degree of misogyny (Esack 3).

\(^6\) Possibly in an attempt to alleviate the sensationalism tied to the term, Haleem dislikes “beat” as a translation and believes that “hit” is closer to the actual Arabic word, daraba (53-54).
After reviewing much of the current theoretical scholarship surrounding Qur’anic exegesis and the question of gender egalitarianism, my contribution calls for the (re)interpretation of Rabi’ah’s poetry in relation to Qur’anic exegesis on gender relations. I aim to bring to light what Kristeva coins the “intertextuality” of Rabi’ah’s spiritual poetry and its relationship to Qur’anic interpretation, as they are intertwined within one discursive field. In a broad sense, I wish to examine Rabi’ah’s spiritual poetry through a Bakhtinian lens, recognizing the inherent multivocality of her language. If we assume that, as Tedlock and Mannheim suggest, culture itself is constructed through language and conversation, and is by definition dialogic in nature, then we must recognize Rabi’ah’s language as evoking the heteroglot voices of her time (Tedlock and Mannheim 3). Rabi’ah’s language, then, travels through time, evokes a social life, and inhabits a multiplicity of voices. Consequently, not only does her writing communicate gender ideologies governing eighth century Muslim society that stem from Qur’anic interpretation, but also, as her poetic language has been reworked, reanalyzed, and reconcanized throughout time, it continues to produce new layers of voices and meaning based on the repeated exegesis that occurs. This, in essence, makes Rabi’ah a crucial player in the production of collective memory, as her poetry and legends have contributed to the socio-historical understanding of Islam as it has been constructed over time.

Turning to the intertextual nature of Rabi’ah’s poetry and its relationship to the Qur’an, we must first recognize the instability of the term “intertextuality.” Like all language according to poststructuralist thought, intertextuality lacks a transparent definition and has been defined and applied in a host of ways (Allen 2). Although the origins of the term reside in Kristeva’s blending of Saussure and Bakhtin, many theorists
have used this analytical tool and way of understanding the interrelationships between and within literature in ways that suit their respective theoretical goals (Allen 2). For the sake of this discussion, I will forge literary ideas stemming from Kristeva and Bakhtin, along with Tedlock and Mannheim’s application of these concepts to the discipline of anthropology, to establish how intertextuality functions as a way to understand both literature and culture (Allen 7). In short, my theoretical work—on a tradition that involves a sacred text and its (re)interpretation—attempts to bridge text and context in religious practice.

Discourse, as Bakhtin suggests, “cannot fail to brush up against thousands of dialogic threads” as it is “woven by socio-ideological consciousness” (670). Although the Qur’an is widely believed to be the divine word of God, it was still revealed within a distinct socio-historical setting. Additionally, some scholars stress that many scriptures within the primary sources of Islam (mainly the Qur’an and the hadith collections) were revealed in direct response to specific situations (usually involving or in relation to the Prophet) (Esack 205-6). This proves that the scripture itself is situated within countless other discourses. By reviewing the Qur’anic hermeneutical practices with regard to gender relations above, we again witness the woven quality of the text in relation to other texts. Additionally, layer upon layer of critical analysis informs the way one views the Qur’an in all of its complexity, and I wish to consider these semantic layers when analyzing Rabi’ah’s discourse as well. Although Islamic theorists/theologians like Haleem and Esack recognize the intertextual relations within the Qur’an itself, I am also interested in the ways that Rabi’ah’s poetry reflects Qur’anic values while simultaneously inverting them due to her spiritual status and social hiatus in the Muslim world. Through
this “populated language” (Bakhtin 678) of heteroglot voices within Rabi’ah’s poetry, we see traces of the Muslim world in which she lived. Her language inhabits the multiplicity of voices inherent in her society as well as the Qur’an’s treatment of gender relations. After repeated Qur’anic exegesis has occurred, we now consider Rabi’ah’s poetic language, as well as the scripture, with and against those collective voices.

Linguistic anthropologists Tedlock and Mannheim extend the dialogic quality of language to culture. They concur with Bakhtin that “any and all present discourse is already replete with echoes, allusions, paraphrases, and outright quotations of prior discourse” (Tedlock and Mannheim 7). Further, by bringing these discourses, whether written or spoken “inside the time or space of our own, whether directly or indirectly,” they result in what Kristeva calls “intertextuality” (Tedlock and Mannheim 16). Consequently, I bring Rabi’ah’s language inhabited by collective voices—those embedded within her poetry as well as the interpretive voices that have accrued over time—into the present. This practice where “author, reader, or analyst join a process of continual production” harkens back to what Kristeva named “le sujet-en-procès, or ‘in process/on trial’ over the text” (Allen 34). As I will expand upon in chapter four, scholars and exegetes have continually (re)interpreted Rabi’ah’s language, identity, and gender over the course of history, and by examining her language and life today, my analysis becomes part of this ever-evolving intertextual process. By the sheer nature of language and experience, my reading of Rabi’ah’s poetry will inevitably produce different intertextual meanings than that of individuals (especially men) set against varying socio-historical backgrounds (Allen 147). In light of the theoretical premise
above, one may argue that Rabi’ah continues to live on through the dialogic process, through other’s construction of her identity over time.

A final but crucial theoretical argument involves Rabi’ah’s language as the “embodiment of otherness” (Allen 45). Because, as discussed at length, women have been largely excluded from the forming and development of the Islamic religious and exegetic tradition, Rabi’ah’s literary contribution works as yet another intertextual tool. Her poetic language may be seen as intertextually weaving Sufi doctrine and literature, Muslim scripture, as well as the other (limited as they are) Muslim female writers throughout history. This process envisions Rabi’ah’s poetry as a porthole to the Muslim female experience—representing a collective consciousness within the social context in which she is writing and beyond.

The study of gender relations in the Qur’an, as evident from this theoretical exploration, has an extensive scholarly history. Although clearly varied in approach and application, this body of scholarship provides a necessary foundation through which to understand the ambiguities surrounding Qur’anic exegesis and the question of gender egalitarianism. With this framework in mind, we may examine the intertextual forces present in both the Qur’an and Rabi’ah’s spiritual poetry—both dialogic in nature and socially charged—and synthesize these two literary works to produce new questions for consideration. Recognizing the many facets of Rabi’ah’s language—the theoretical, social, and religious dimensions—allows us to examine her poetic language (and its residual effects) in all of its complexity.
III. Rabi’ah’s Spiritual Poetry

The Feminine, the Body, and the Moment

Rabi’ah’s poetic language, as discussed above, is fraught with meaning and multivocality. This chapter will explore four of the poems most commonly linked to Rabi’ah, the dialogic quality of her sacred language, its intertextual relationship with the Qur’an, and her language as critique of nominal Muslim worshippers. After the preceding discussion surrounding the question of gender egalitarianism in the Qur’an, it is apparent that gender is and has been a central concern of Islam. With this said, I seek to examine Rabi’ah’s poetic language and the multiple voices that her language inhabits—that is, voices that address and/or reflect the gender-related concerns situated against a specific ideological and historical background. Specifically, in this section of chapter three, I will investigate three interrelated questions that manifest in the analysis of Rabi’ah’s discourse and the significance of each: 1) how Rabi’ah evokes a feminine voice and presence; 2) how she employs the body as a metaphorical device; and 3) how the Sufi’s emphasis on the moment resonates in both her language and lived experience (as relayed by others).

Rabi’ah’s location as a largely autonomous, female saint of Islam makes both her identity and language ripe for analysis and places her at the heart of the gender debate. I would argue that, on the whole, Rabi’ah’s poetry communicates a gendered perspective on the Muslim faith, and this role is confirmed in the teachings of the Qur’an. In “You are the companion of my heart,” Rabi’ah writes: “Though my body I offer to those who desire it. / My body is friendly to guests / But you the companion of my heart / Are the guest of my soul” (2-5). Rabi’ah’s repeated reference to her “body” and the giving of her
physical self connotes a female voice. Muslim teachings frequently emphasize women’s spiritual role of “giving” their bodies to their husbands in the marital union. The Qur'an illustrates the male taking from the female in Sura II: “Your women are a tillage for you; so come unto your tillage as you wish…” (Young 101). Additionally, Esak elaborates on how women’s sexual obligations have been expressed in the Qur’an: “The groom purchases her sexual favors…here we also observe the implicit notion of a one-sided duty to fulfill the sexual needs of her husband” (193). We must acknowledge the question, as explored in chapter two, of a divinely sanctioned or scriptural basis to men’s power or place above women. Although I do not claim that this tension is in any way near resolution, the multivocality of Rabi’ah’s language functions to reflect this scriptural tension. With this in mind, I want to call attention to how Rabi’ah’s poetic language not only communicates the connection of Sufi teachings to the scriptures, but her language also points to the role traditionally assumed by the common Muslim woman as one who “gives” to he who takes. More specifically, the intertextual reinterpretation of Rabi’ah’s poetry, specifically in relation to Qur’anic exegesis on gender relations, calls for us to further contemplate the ambiguity surrounding the “giving” of her body in the poem at hand.

When exploring the ambiguities surrounding the message of “You are the companion of my heart,” one may argue that Rabi’ah discredits the body, or freely offers her body for anyone’s taking. One may take issue with this interpretation and struggle to reconcile the negative implication of Rabi’ah’s “offering” of herself. Thus, scholars have made assumptions that Rabi’ah has either been violated or is falling into a submissive
female role—one commonplace in eighth-century Arab society. This interpretation also highlights the foundational Sufi practice that brings awareness to the inner self and rejects the material and the physical. The Sufi’s goal to give up all material and immaterial parts of the self to enter “nonexistence” in her ascension toward gnosis would imply that Rabi’ah’s body is not of importance to her; thus, the giving of her physical body does not influence her soul’s worth in her quest for mystical union. Rabi’ah’s all-consuming focus on her spirituality and connection to God diminishes any bodily worth, and her physical form, then, becomes irrelevant—a mere shell to occupy in this world and to simultaneously strive to overcome—due to the indulgences and temptations that the human conditions represents.

This interpretation, however, raises a host of questions which I believe are worth pausing to consider. First we may ask if, through this “offering,” Rabi’ah’s physical self becomes a type of sacrifice or offering to God. In this way, although her body is a physical, material form that she does not value as a practicing Sufi, we may assume that she would not make a worthless offering to God. As divine creation, her body would, indeed, hold value. Second, does this giving of her physical self demonstrate her absolute disregard for the material? Third, we may interpret Rabi’ah contributing to or enabling another individual’s transgressive actions—starkly contrasting with Sufi ideals. The early Sufis, like Rabi’ah, discouraged any form of sexual behavior or feelings of lust (Schimmel 265-267), which makes it unlikely that Rabi’ah would intentionally offer (or

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7 I claim that women, on the whole, took on a submissive role in Arab society due to the evidence that women were bought and sold as slaves, lived as concubines, and were required to be under the constant surveillance of a male guardian. Although contested, Rabi’ah’s possible early history as a slave exists as evidence of a possible violation and that situation may have forced her to take on the submissive female role commonplace at the time. I bring this to light to illustrate why one may read her “offering” of herself in a more literal way and assume that she did, indeed, endure injustices that placed her in submission to men.
mean to imply that she is offering) her body for another’s sin. I am not suggesting that Rabi’ah freely gave her body to satisfy another’s sexual appetite, but I do argue that the ambiguity of her language encourages further research questions focusing on the feminine, the role of the body, and Sufism—in the context of Medieval Muslim society.

This talk of the body naturally leads us to the question of celibacy with regard to Sufism, and, as a result, Rabi’ah herself. Although frequently associated with the monastic life, celibacy was not considered an “invariable requirement” of Sufism (Ahmed 66). Yet, one must assume that most female Sufis (especially Rabi’ah) did not simply give away their bodies to others. Although one cannot know for certain, scholars such as Smith and Upton maintain that Rabi’ah led a life of celibacy (Smith 7; Upton 12). She has been constructed as virginal and pure, both in body and soul (Cornell 294). The question of celibacy and virginal purity leads us to acknowledge the textual evidence of Rabi’ah’s difficult life in slavery, and, if true, the likelihood that she endured sexual injustices at the hands of her oppressors.

In addition to the aforementioned explanations for her language choice as a way to reveal gender inequalities inherent in Muslim society or to relate those messages embedded in the Qu’ran, uncertainty remains as to whether, in this poem, Rabi’ah is reclaiming her body as her own or completely renouncing it. One may understand “You are the companion of my heart” as a renunciation of her physical body, thus reestablishing her full “bodily” control. She carefully uses the word, “guest,” to describe those who have taken her body. The reader may interpret her word choice as awkward if the injustices toward her were committed against her will. Yet this choice may also be viewed as an act of agency, that through her choice of language, Rabi’ah shows how, in
spite of possible physical violation, she ultimately controls her spiritual destiny—which transcends the body. She exalts the soul far above the body, references the divine love in which she is engaged, and establishes a hierarchy of divine love over worldly, physical love. In essence, she takes ownership of her experiences, and goes beyond merely using her words to process or translate her past. Instead, Rabi’ah recognizes the tension between disowning her body (due to its innate material quality) and being tied to it while in this world. This is a crucial point: Rabi’ah recognizes her corporeal form as a source of experience and, regardless of her disgust for the material, must ultimately reconcile this truth and occupy her body until she reaches heavenly gnosis.

By focusing again on the social life and intertextual quality of the poetry, Rabi’ah’s language in the present tense points to the way she overturns the male-hegemonic force that undergirds her society. In effect, Rabi’ah may be interpreted as railing against the notion that “biology and sexuality” function as the underlying governing force for all “male-female interaction in the dominant society” (Butorovic 142). She makes use of the body as a metaphorical device that expands the reader’s understanding of her mystical union with God, while also communicating the physical mistreatment of Muslim women in society. The inherent multivocality of her language conveys the Qur’an’s treatment of gender relations while simultaneously challenging this scriptural interpretation through her mystical experience. While Rabi’ah, through her spiritual commitment, manages to avoid the common mistreatment of women, her language, paradoxically, exposes these gender injustices.

Rabi’ah continues to reflect a feminine presence in the poem “O my Lord,” interjecting a female voice into the Muslim textual tradition. She professes: “Kings lock
their doors / And every lover is alone with love. / Here, I am alone with you” (2-5). Clearly, the Sufi aim “to be with God alone, without the world and its distractions” comes through in this particular poem (Schimmel 267). If Rabi’ah did, indeed, live a life of celibacy to “pursue her quest [of closeness to God] unhindered” (Smith 276), she metaphorically and paradoxically communicates this through the relationship of a “lover” to his/her “love.” Just as “stars glitter and human eyes are closed” (2) amidst lovers’ dreams, Rabi’ah relates her desire for an equally intense, mystical union with God. She uses her feminine position (and voice) to showcase the intensity of her relationship with God through the male/female model of lover and beloved.

The male/female model in Rabi’ah’s poetry, then, directly lends itself to analyze this gender dynamic in the socio-historical context of eighth-century Muslim society. In an effort to contextualize these gender roles, Wadud asserts: “Not only is the female experience considered unique from the male experience, but for all the centuries of Islamic history it has been considered both sacred and temptational, requiring close guardianship” (“Alternative” 18; my emphasis). If the female Islamic experience mandates this “close guardianship,” then Rabi’ah positions God as her “guardian.” Therefore, just as “every lover is alone with love,” Rabi’ah is alone with God. Echoes of Qur’anic verse and the common female experience emerge through the heteroglot quality of Rabi’ah’s language. With God as her “guardian,” Rabi’ah communicates the social inferiority of women of her time, yet through this same feminine voice, she simultaneously exposes her autonomy from worldly men. This harkens back to the theoretical debate regarding men’s “stewardship” as described in the Qur’an and explored in chapter two. Rabi’ah’s language may be seen as indirectly speaking to this debate, as
she positions God as her steward or guardian and points to the way women have been constructed as socially inferior, needing (in most cases) a male mind (and body) to lead them. Whether this role of guardian or steward, as described in Surah II, was designed for man to “maintain her and attend to her affairs” or to “have authority over” her, the fact remains that Rabi’ah places the divine, rather than man, in this role (Surah 2:221-222).

Margaret Smith adds to the conversation on male guardianship:

Again, a Muslim freewoman in practice is always under the guardianship of a male relative, father, husband, brother or uncle, and this guardian has the right to marry his ward to whom he will, and though technically, according to Muslim law, her consent is necessary, actually she will not be allowed to remain unmarried (7).

One may conclude, then, that Rabi’ah’s history as a former slave left her with no known relatives, and, as a result, she did not have to abide by all of the common customs of the Muslim woman—specifically the custom of guardianship by a male relative. No account of Rabi’ah’s life involved an individual serving the role of her “guardian” besides God. I believe that Rabi’ah escapes this cultural constraint of male guardian, and I posit that it is through her identity as a former slave and her elevated spiritual status within the Sufi sect that she gains access to a more authentic Islamic ethos. She interacts directly with the Divine—without human interference.

To extend this conversation involving male guardianship further, Rab’iah’s sacred language also speaks to divine love and marriage. She distinguishes between divine and human love in “O my Lord” when she describes “human eyes” as “closed” to the divine
love that she shares with God. She draws attention to worldly, human love when she claims that even “Kings lock their doors” to be with their lovers (3). Thus, even royalty engages in this worldly love that Rabi’ah gladly foregoes for her spiritual connection with God. She elevates herself as wed to the divine and discredits the authority or significance of a worldly king. Royalty, in this world, is grounded in human accomplishments and familial ties. Yet the divine royalty through which she is engaged overshadows all human promise. It comes as no surprise then that Rabi’ah was said to have openly critiqued the worldly institution of marriage:

Marriage has to do with being—

But where can this being be found?

I should belong to you? What makes you think

I even belong to myself?

I am His—His! (Upton 18).

As evident from her words on marriage, Rabi’ah looked to God as her bridegroom and despised earthly marriage—even when her marriage proposals came from followers on the Way like herself (Smith 31-33).

In the same vein, Rabi’ah’s commentary on marriage aligns with her numerous marriage refusals, which translate to her resistance of proscribed gender roles and social expectations. Smith quotes Rabi’ah in response to any “bride price” offered her: “The Lord I worship can double it” (Upton 11). Ahmed relates how “tales in which Rabi’ah rejects offers of marriage from numerous admiring Sufi companions…emphasize[s] her autonomy and ability to remain free of any [human] male authority” (68). Through Rabi’ah’s mysticism and all-encompassing love for God, she establishes the possibility of
gaining freedom from male authority; however, her relationship with God also reflects
the standard male role of “guardian” in her society. Sells describes Rabi’ah’s ability to
“send issues of gender into a wicked spin” through her marriage refusals: “...when
someone offers marriage to her, she refers the question to her master, the divine beloved
(who in this metaphor is figured masculine)” (153). Sells thus points out that “to marry
her is in some sense to marry her master, because of the implication of mystical union”
(153). In other words, Rabi’ah’s mysticism, revealed through her spiritual poetry, works
in response to the prevailing gender roles and expectations of eighth century Muslim
society (Ahmed 68). Rabi’ah’s spiritual poetry and marriage refusals expose the male-
dominated model of guardian (sheikh, steward) to woman. Through her construction of
God as her husband and guardian, Rabi’ah exploits the normative male/female model—
that which is socially perpetuated and, arguably, scripturally based—in her language and
lived experience. Rabi’ah’s language works as an intertextual tool to showcase the
various voices in contention (societal voices and Qur’anic interpretive voices), while also
contributing to and complicating this conversation surrounding gender roles and the
social expectations of women.

Rabi’ah’s critique of social practices extends beyond the marital union into
community involvement and basic human interaction. When studying Rabi’ah, we notice
a tension between her desire to isolate herself and commune with God and her divine
obligation to guide her disciples and servants on the Way. She is portrayed as living a
hermetic lifestyle, yet stories reveal her interaction with both her disciples and servants.
Smith writes that she prayed to be “but a stranger in Thy country, and lonely among Thy
worshippers” (51). Once again, although she longs for constant divine connection, her
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spiritual position in this life requires that she interact with others. This tension demonstrates the complexity of Rabi’ah’s character and parallels the Sufi conflict of striving to transcend or put off the physical, while having to occupy a physical body in this life.

Many scholars (including Margaret Smith) call attention to Rabi’ah’s lack of a spiritual master or sheikh (besides the Divine). In fact, she remains the only exception of one who attains such enlightenment without a sheikh (Engineer 137-138). Rabi’ah’s ability to experience her faith without guidance from a sheikh makes her an anomaly within her community and confirms her closeness with God in a society overflowing with male-dependence. Consequently, through her intense intimacy with God and her confidence in this relationship (as revealed by others), she navigates both the Sufi sect and Muslim society. Rabi’ah’s potential history as a slave and mystic lifestyle allows her to transcend many of the social expectations of mainstream Muslim women of the time, and more importantly, within her community she is revered and given more autonomy than is typically deemed acceptable.

It is important to recognize the Sufis’ emphasis on time, or the “moment” (waqt), as an indication of spiritual awareness and health. Surfacing in much of Sufi spiritual poetry, the thematic element of the moment is not unique to Rabi’ah’s poetry; however, it is worth pausing to consider in the context of her sacred language. The individual worshipper was often called “a son of the moment,” which translates to one who is in a fully awakened and devoted state (Sells 100). Sells explains that “a son of his moment,” implies that “he is completely occupied with the religious obligation of his present state, carrying out what is demanded of him at the time” (100). Not only does the concept of
time come to light in Sell’s statement above, but the reference to the Sufi practitioner as a
“son” assumes that she must be male. When further examining Rabi’ah’s poetry in light
of this concept of time, Rabi’ah’s complete immersion in the present state comes to the
fore. She employs words like “here,” “pass,” “vanish,” and “perish,” all of which signify
the importance of the here and now or imply the fleeting quality of time.

In “O my Lord,” Rabi’ah places herself “here” in the moment with God. As a
Sufi woman, Rabi’ah stands in stark contrast to the “son” of Sufism—again, bending the
traditionally gendered system of identification. Yet, her language and lived experience
uphold the vital Sufi tenet of being fully present. Furthermore, the gender assumption
that all Sufis take on the role as male “sons,” again, complicates the highly feminized
Sufi spiritual path.

Let us reconsider the Sufi command to “be not content to be less than a woman”
in God’s eyes (Butorovic 142), directly contrasting with the “son” of Sufism. With this
paradox in mind, I would argue that Rabi’ah refuses to accept either the feminized or
masculinized spiritual experience as whole. Instead, she achieves an androgynous
identity, at various times, by inhabiting what is socially (and spiritually) constructed as
feminine, while also exhibiting normative “masculine” behaviors of the time (that will be
illustrated in the section to follow). In essence, Rabi’ah’s language works to critique both
the feminized and masculinized spiritual paths. Rabi’ah’s resistance to embodying a
fully male or female role (as socially constructed) informs how and why, historically
speaking, various scholars have over-explained her gender identity. Chapter four will
delve deeper into the (re)construction of Rabi’ah’s identity through the centuries; yet just
as her poetic language and identity is ever-changing due to the heteroglot nature of
discourse, Rabi’ah also reflects this process of continually “becoming” in her approach to her faith.

The Sufi’s focus on the moment is rooted in the practice of what Wadud calls “engaged surrender” (“Alternative” 11). As previously noted in chapter two, the Sufi mystics may have been the first to take this approach to the faith and focus on the relationship between Allah and the khalifah (trustee on earth) as a process in-flux and ever-changing (Wadud “Alternative” 11). The practice of “lived Islam,” then, involves continuous Qur’anic (re)interpretation and surrender to the “divine order” of the cosmos—and this process is never complete (Wadud “Alternative” 11). The Sufis’ desire to be ever-present in the moment reflects their engaged surrender to divine will as “always in the process of becoming, [therefore] humankind can only hope to gain direction toward that will by likewise being in process” (Wadud “Alternative” 11). As previously established in chapter one, the Sufis valued the Qur’an and much of their practice was grounded in the sacred text. However, they sought to access a more authentic Islamic vision—one untainted by ritualistic tradition. Sufi mystics, like Rabi’ah, were not interested in doctrine that evolved out of (patriarchal) interpretations of the sacred texts and Islamic law.

Although the practice of engaged surrender is not in and of itself gendered, it aligns with the social practice of women’s surrender to men. Rabi’ah’s life and poetry exemplifies a radical commitment to divine will, and her language, like her commitment to God, is also “in process” over time through its intertextual relationships and heteroglot quality. In effect, this process resists a stale or static approach to the faith. As a Sufi mystic, Rabi’ah’s quest to deny this world and the next (as communicated through her
life and poetic language) hinges on communion with the present moment. As a result, we witness a fresh approach to God—a process focused on constant renewal—that resonates in her language.

Rabi’ah’s sacred language relates the tension between the material, tangible nature of physical relations (which comes through as she communicates her goal of oneness with God as an alternative to the material) and the Sufi’s longing for self-abnegation—their complete spiritual focus (or engaged surrender). Once again, Rabi’ah’s language evokes this paradox within Sufism. The nature of physical relations brings about a sense of immediacy as well as intimacy. As a lover and beloved unite, they are one in the moment, facing each other, and fully present. As Rabi’ah refers to how “every lover is alone with love,” she is alone with God, her lover (“O my Lord” 4). Rabi’ah’s invocation of the material body creates an immediate, tangible encounter for the reader. This corporeal representation of Rabi’ah’s mystical union with God brings awareness to the notion of time and the “moment” as an important element of Sufism, and she uses the familiar trope of physical union as a metaphor for the far rarer spiritual union. Yet, Rabi’ah’s presentation of the material body, once again, complicates the Sufi’s standard of disregard for the physical self, thus exemplifying the struggle between the inner and outer facets of the individual. Hence, she fully engages the moment, confronts the material and immaterial, and lives to exploit the present tense—revealed in both her life and poetry.
Rabi’ah’s Critique of Mainline Muslims

Through analyzing the language of Rabi’ah’s poems “Your Prayers were light” and “O My Lord” and the related anecdotes about her life, the reader can understand the depth of Rabi’ah’s character as mediated through language. As relayed in the last section, on the one hand, she puts forth a female voice that relates the role of women in society and presents herself as wed to God. Here I wish to locate the shift in Rabi’ah’s language as it takes on a more assertive, critical tone—yet another way her language evokes textual layers and a social life. By focusing on her pure love of her deity and her intense prayer life, we come to understand the elevated spiritual state which she occupies and how her great piety serves to critique nominal worshippers. Thus, this section will demonstrate how Rabi’ah’s language functions as a tool to denounce lukewarm Muslims and her Sufi contemporaries. Her language is supported by stories describing her encounters with other Sufis, particularly her male contemporaries, whom she consistently criticizes and apparently surpasses in spiritual enlightenment. While Rabi’ah speaks from a sacred voice that communicates a feminine presence, she also embodies a critical role typically reserved for the men of her society. Rabi’ah’s religious presence enables her to achieve respect equivalent (at minimum) to the male Sufi. As a female renunciant, she exploits her closeness to God and role as a spiritual pillar in society (among her fellow Sufis) to make her voice heard and exceeds the limiting gender roles inherent in the cultural orientation of the time.

When assessing Rabi’ah’s life and poetry, the reader notices the Sufi emphasis on worshipping God for his sake alone (Helmsinki 24; Schimmel 267). Rabi’ah openly condemns those who love “The Traditions,” or doctrine—anything that may jeopardize a
pure love of God (Smith 30). Upton cites Rabī‘ah as stating: “May God steal from you / All that steals you from Him” (Upton 7). The attitude of *tawakkul*, or complete reliance on God, is a vital aspect of the Sufi mystical experience. Rabī‘ah’s language and life experience (as relayed by others) consistently reflects her radically pure love for God.8 This unconditional and arguably radical love involves the “integration of emotional and somatic experience” (Butorovic 142). Karamustafa claims that Rabī‘ah may have been one of the first female mystics to “teach the doctrine of Pure Love, the disinterested love of God for His own sake alone” (4), and Upton points to Rabī‘ah as one of the premier Sufis to introduce true worship of God as denying desire for this world and the next (17).

Rabī‘ah has been remembered as proclaiming: “My love of all-Merciful God leaves me no room for hostility towards Satan” (Butorovic 145). This statement illustrates Rabī‘ah’s all-encompassing love of God—that overflows within her and leaves no space to even consider evil or impurity.

In “O my Lord, if I worship you,” Rabī‘ah reinforces this desire for an untainted, selfless love of God. She asks God to examine her heart and intentions when she writes: “…if I worship you / from fear of Hell, / Burn me in Hell” (1-3). Rabī‘ah employs

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8 Some scholars point to Rabī‘ah’s likely history as a slave as the source of her unwavering love of God (Upton 14). However, I argue that she upholds the core Sufi tenet of *tawakkul* (complete reliance on God), and this is not unique to Rabī‘ah. On the other hand, Rabī‘ah’s extreme portrayal, at times, of this pure love elicits theorizing by scholars as to possible reasons for her radical (and, at times, public) display of this love. Specifically, I am referring to stories of her running through the streets with a torch and pail and her public rebukes of other worshippers that scholars have been trying to reconcile over the centuries. The desire to rationalize Rabī‘ah’s behavior makes sense when we consider why someone who pursues a private, intimate union with God (locked away with her love) would feel compelled to publicly proclaim her devotion. I would argue that, although her language and actions may be interpreted as contradictory, Rabī‘ah’s public display works to critique other worshippers in both the Sufi sect and the larger Muslim community. Additionally, this also speaks to my discussion of the tension between her longing for seclusion with God and her responsibility to her disciples who rely on her teaching and example. Finally, it is important to note that the public dimension of Rabī‘ah may be the product of appropriation by her subsequent followers—or scholars’ interpretation of her life experience and the embellishment of these stories throughout time. Again, this confirms the heteroglot quality of her language and life experience as revealed by others.
extremely direct language that lacks subtlety but arrives at a very clear message. She illustrates her longing for a completely wholesome love of God that permeates each moment—not a commitment to God that depends on ensuring a place in Heaven or avoiding the flames of Hell. She continues to ask God, “If I worship you in hope of Paradise, / Exclude me,” and concludes with, “If I worship you for you alone, / Do not withhold your eternal beauty” (4-7). Her “absolute devotion” to God sets Rabi’ah apart from many other Sufi mystics, especially the great male Sufi masters who were “still held down by affection and egoism” (Sells 153). Consequently, Rabi’ah’s complete surrender to God, as a female worshipper, also mirrors women’s normative cultural role in society—the submissive role, to both God and man, that women have been socialized into. Rabi’ah seems to have acquired (whether willingly or unwillingly) active authority through passive self-abnegation. Her dominant status among Sufis stems from being completely submissive to the Divine.

When considering the various interpretations and inconsistencies regarding Rabi’ah’s character and family background relayed by many authors over the course of her life and throughout time to the present day, the quality of Rabi’ah’s prayer life and conversational tone with God continually surface as a reliable indication of her spiritual strength. In fact, Smith claims that her prayer life is one quality that sets her apart from other Muhammadan mystics. Smith categorizes her radical prayer life as “free prayer,” or conversation with God (47). Rabi’ah longed for “loving converse with her Lord…simply communion with the Divine friend, and in perfect satisfaction in his presence” (Smith 49). Rabi’ah’s conversational tone with God (exemplified in both her spoken and written word) implies a certain level of comfort, and she does not appear
afraid to ask for what she desires. In ‘Attar’s stories about Rabi’ah (and also reflected in her poetry), “her relationship with the deity…is often related directly to her intimate and unaffected conversations, in which she calls on the deity with confidence and even with familiarity” (Sells 153). While she exhibits a certain confidence about her spirituality and relationship with God, she also communicates great reverence, the ability to be fully engaged in prayer, and little tolerance for falling short of complete love of her deity.

As a female mystic, Rabi’ah purposefully uses her voice to uncover particular spiritual presumptions of Muslim society. In “O My Lord, if I worship you,” Rabi’ah stresses how God sustains the individual and to rid life of any worldly temptations (Smith 30). This poem, then, may be seen as a critique of the “good Muslims [who] were so concerned about avoiding the sufferings of hell and trying to get into paradise that they forgot about God” (Young 110). In addition to her passionate expression of love for God, Rabi’ah highlights the various ways that orthodox Muslims perceived God, whether they constructed their devotion through impure foundations of fear or they held selfish desires to enter paradise. In direct connection to this poem, one of the most famous stories about Rabi’ah describes her “carrying a torch and a ewer through the streets of Basra, intent on setting fire to paradise and pouring water on the flames of hell” (Ahmed 68). As in the poem, her actions illustrate her longing to bring awareness to the motives of those around her, in the hopes that “those two veils would disappear from the eyes of believers and [that] they come to love God for his Beauty and not out of fear of hell or desire for paradise” (Ahmed 68). While most worshippers were, according to Rabi’ah, concerned with reaping the benefits of their relationship with God, Sufi practitioners sought to be consumed with God in the present state. Rabi’ah’s lived experience and
sacred language stress a sort of cleansing—ridding oneself of impure spiritual motivations and striving towards complete purification and a more authentic Islamic vision. It is important to notice how Rabi’ah’s rhetoric preaches rejection of this world in favor of pure, exclusive retreat into God’s love. But her activism—the very act of using her language as a vehicle for social and religious critique—is rooted in social engagement with this world. In short, both Rabi’ah’s life and poetry confirm her commitment to loving God for his sake alone and her resistance to tradition, and, at the same time, to unveiling mainstream Muslim spiritual shortcomings.

Rabi’ah’s poetry exposes the contrast between mainstream Muslim approaches to the faith and the monastic experience, and her culturally grounded discourse works to critique convention. As established in the first chapter, the monastic life was “officially frowned upon” by orthodox Muslims (Upton 13). In “Your prayers were light,” Rabi’ah again criticizes the nominal followers of Islam. She states, “Your prayers were light, your worship / was rest, / Your sleep an enemy of prayer” (1-3). Rabi’ah describes the subject’s lack of depth and incomplete devotion to God, and she relays the superficial degree to which people may commune with God. She equates the subject’s “worship” to “rest,” thus, insinuating the inactive quality of his or her worship. Additionally, Rabi’ah describes the subject as spiritually asleep, as their “sleep” is “an enemy of prayer.” Rabi’ah continues: “The days of your life a chance / At which you failed.” Thus, she conveys the opportunity to connect with God each day. Like much of the other poetry discussed, Rabi’ah stresses the importance of the present moment in worshipping God.

Margaret Smith discusses how “Your prayers were light” may have come out of a dream—as if Rabi’ah was criticizing her sleep at night due to a prolonged illness (Smith 47). However, I maintain that this poem is in line with her treatment of mainstream Muslims and her alleged rebukes of her half-hearted contemporaries.
Like the subject’s spiritual life, “Days pass and vanish slowly / And perish” (6-7). Here, Rabi’ah reinforces the necessity of taking advantage of each day’s (potential) spiritual offerings as a way of showing complete devotion to the divine. In summary, Rabi’ah employs her language as a strong criticism of the lukewarm, mainline Muslims whose lack of full devotion to God inevitably results in their slow spiritual death.10

Continuing with the above interpretation of “Your Prayers were Light,” we must consider the gender implications of Rabi’ah’s critique in the context of a male-dominated society. With proscribed gender roles being lived out by the majority, Rabi’ah defies these gender norms through her critique of mainline Muslims as described above. In addition, legends of Rabi’ah showcase her rebuking her disciples and male contemporaries, specifically Hasan of Basra and Ibrahim.11 Upton describes Hasan as a “well-known leader of an extreme school of world-denying ascetics,” and many stories pit Rabi’ah and Hasan against each other—typically elevating Rabi’ah as the more “fully-developed mystic” (8). They both come from the same spiritual foundation, yet legends of Rabi’ah portray her as superior through both her wit and pure devotion to God.

Stories reveal Rabi’ah’s criticism of Ibrahim’s long journey to reach the Kaaba: “You were crazy enough to take fourteen years to get to the Kaaba with your ritual prayer, while I, with my inner prayer, am here already” (11).12

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10 In my analysis of “Your prayers were light,” I interpret the subject of the poem (the “you”) as orthodox Muslims. However, if the “you” is figured as Rabi’ah herself, this poem becomes a potential self-rebuke for failing to live up to Sufi ideals. I bring this up to demonstrate the various ways that Rabi’ah’s language has and will be analyzed, and this, in turn, contributes to the complexity of her perceived identity.

11 Upton claims that some stories reveal that Hasan was eleven years old when Rabi’ah died. Yet, he has also been labeled as one of Rabi’ah’s many marriage proposals.

12 It is unclear whether or not Rabi’ah actually completes the hajj. Upton links this to her “difficulty coming to terms with the conventional Islamic community” (10). Regardless of whether or not she made the pilgrimage, it is evident from her reproduced comment that she valued communion with the Divine over
It is important to underscore how, in her reported statement to Ibrahim, Rabi’ah resists legalistic Muslim tradition, stresses the importance of being present (as opposed to always striving to reach Mecca), and exalts her prayer life as her primary means of connecting with God. Therefore, Rabi’ah stands out as a female rebuking her spiritually-soft fellow Sufis in both her exchanges with them and her spiritual poetry.

It is worth noting how through Rabi’ah’s critique of convention and common Muslim worshippers, a double condemnation occurs. I have shown how Rabi’ah’s language, in multiple instances, is infused with a feminine perspective on the Muslim faith. However, I have also argued that in some cases her language takes on a critical tone typically reserved for the men of her society. After considering Rabi’ah and her language—in all of its complexity—we recognize her androgynous role through her critique of both the feminized and masculinized paths associated with the Muslim faith tradition and Sufism. First, she refuses to take on a male guardian (other than God), and this highlights her resistance to the normative female role in society. Second, the actual act itself of her rebuke towards her contemporaries highlights the shortcomings of the female role as she embodies a more typically masculine trait of critique. However, through the message of her speech act, Rabi’ah critiques her male contemporaries as they inhabit a masculine role. By normative societal standards, Rabi’ah does not hold a position of power (due to women’s submissive role). Therefore, she exhibits androgynous characteristics due to her spiritual calling—to lead others on the Way and maintain disciples—a counter-hegemonic role scarcely embodied by women in the Muslim community. In her critique of orthodox Muslim women, what Rabi’ah is really tradition and ritual. Also, it may be inferred from her statement that she felt the spiritual component of the journey was fulfilled.
critiquing is their passive internalization of patriarchal values. In addition, if Rabi’ah inhabited a strictly feminine role in society, the cultural standards of the time would prevent her from open critique.

In chapter two we established the impact of the human component on the sacred texts (in comparison to Allah), and I argue that the passages relating to social situations would seem more distant from Allah and, therefore, prone to greater misinterpretation. This point is crucial when we discuss Rabi’ah’s critique of convention. Much of orthodox Muslims’ practices at the time stemmed from Qur’anic exegesis (male interpretation) and rituals—like the hajj. Rabi’ah’s life and language, in accordance with Sufi ideals, seems to be calling attention back to the basic worship of God for his sake alone. This pure, untainted worship strives to eliminate the inevitable human error in interpretation and practice. Again, Rabi’ah’s voice works as a mediating one.

Overall, we acknowledge the various discursive effects of Rabi’ah’s language—that which is culturally bound and dialogic in nature. The various voices in contention parallel those same positions in society, and we observe threads of Sufi doctrine, Muslim social practices, and Qur’anic allusions intertwined within her sacred language.

IV. Rabi’ah’s Identity Related by Scholars

Due largely to the lack of female-based textual sources of Middle Eastern history, we rely largely on documents which are almost exclusively male-oriented and male-driven. This is important in order to remember how Rabi’ah’s identity has been constructed by her language, various scholars’ interpretation of her language and identity, and the oral tradition of storytelling passed down through the centuries. With little hard-and-fast knowledge of her life, the various voices in conversation about Rabi’ah work to
shape and reshape her identity. Thus, the picture of Rabi’ah is ever-changing due to the intertextual nature of discourse. In this way, by engaging with various scholars’ portrayals of Rabi’ah, a more fully developed picture of her identity may emerge.

In Margaret Smith’s complete and extensive modern biography of Rabi’ah, she makes a case for Rabi’ah’s twelfth-century biographer, Farid al-Din ‘Attar, and his attempted accuracy when recording Rabi’ah’s life and stories. Smith describes ‘Attar, as one “at pains to make his biographies as complete as possible” (6). She goes on to note that ‘Attar had included a “full account, not only of the lives of his subjects, but of their reputed miracles and their sayings and teachings, so that we may assume that he searched all possible sources in pursuit of information and doubtless he had access to documents long since destroyed” (6). She also brings up the fact that ‘Attar—like other biographers—included the various legends (and miracles, in Rabi’ah’s case) surrounding his subjects, and how these legends (whose truth value is unknown) are, nonetheless, important (6). I concur with Smith’s assertion that these legends give color to our picture of Rabi’ah, thus providing a more nuanced view of her identity and how she was perceived (and revered) by her contemporaries. Biographers’ dissemination of the legends associated with Rabi’ah reaffirms her worth to the Muslim community. With this said, Smith does acknowledge the challenge for scholars and readers to disentangle the myth from the actual facts of Rabi’ah’s life (6).
Rabi’ah’s tribal background, ethnicity, and, consequently, social status have been the source of much debate throughout history.\textsuperscript{13} She has been linked to the last group of Basra-based female ascetics and tied to Arab, Persian or Iraqi Aramaic ethnic heritage (Cornell 293). If indeed she belonged to the Arab clan (or “client status”), then she arose from lowly origin. This, however, indicates that her parents were not Muslims, according to Cornell, since poverty would equate with slavery and “Islamic law forbids Muslims from enslaving each other” (293). While ‘Attar and Margaret Smith stress her poor beginnings and original Christian background, Al-Jahiz contradicts these claims. Here we understand the ambiguity that persists regarding Rabi’ah’s roots. The numerous voices in contention work to influence our understanding of Rabi’ah’s identity, while also echoing the multivocality of her own poetic language as well.

However “complete” he intended his biography to be, one may argue that, in \textit{Memorial of the Friends of God}, ‘Attar conveys an ambiguous representation of Rabi’ah’s gender. In the beginning of the work, ‘Attar relates the insignificance of her gender in light of God: “It is not the outward form that matters, but the inner purpose of the heart” (Smith 271). However, he contradicts himself by characterizing Rabi’ah’s spiritual transformation in gendered terms: “When a woman becomes a ‘man’ in the path of God, she is a man and one cannot any more call her woman” (Young 110). ‘Attar may be alluding to the idea that men walk closer to God, thus Rabi’ah’s male transformation takes her that much closer. In the same vein, ‘Attar describes Rabi’ah: “No she was not a

\textsuperscript{13} I borrow Keddie’s use of the word “tribe” from her “Introduction” to \textit{Women in Middle Eastern History}. Keddie discusses the role of the term “tribe” when discussing the Middle East: “It translates terms in the main Middle Eastern languages that refer to contiguous groups claiming descent from one ancestor” (3). Further, Keddie explains that “certain familial controls may be tied to the prevalence of tribal structures” (4). This is important to remember as Rabi’ah’s origins persist as a source of much contention among scholars.
single woman / But a hundred men over” (Butorovic 144). One may interpret ‘Attar exalting Rabi’ah above all men, and further exemplifying this notion when he also calls her the “crown of men” (Butorovic 144).

Sells asks the question posed by many historical, social and mystical perspectives: “How [might] a woman be included in the ranks of Sufi masters, called, at the time, the ‘ranks of men’ according to ‘Attar?’” (152). In response to this question, we may acknowledge the possibility that ‘Attar’s emphasis on Rabi’ah’s gender transformation impacted her fame and acceptance in the minds of the audience; especially when recognizing her contemporary status as one of the most famous saints of Islam. Thus, if ‘Attar truly stood behind his sentiments regarding the “mystical notion of unity” that “the qawm (folk, Sufis) are ‘one,’ and in oneness, there are no individuals, and thus what room is there for man or woman,” his choice to over-explain her gender still seems problematic” (Sells 152). Based on his understanding of Rabi’ah as neither fully male nor female, ‘Attar translates Rabi’ah’s life into a textual form, exalts her above men (by exalting her above men and women), and forfeits the significance of gender in relation to God.

Farid Esak makes a concession for ‘Attar’s characterization of Rabi’ah when he describes the audience of the time as “essentially…males.” He goes on to elaborate that “while [at times] the text is about women; it is often addressed to men” (195; my emphasis). Esak points out that “almost all the classical exegetes have argued: that men are superior, that this superiority is both functional and essential to their maleness;… [and] it is nonetheless a gift from God” (199). When ‘Attar portrays Rabi’ah’s gender as “ambivalent at best” (Young 110), he may be ensuring her credibility in the eyes of the
male-dominated audience. More than an oversight, ‘Attar purposefully secures Rabi’ah’s relevance as a spiritual figure within the Muslim faith. Yet, within Rabi’ah’s own poetry a feminine voice resonates within the language, complicating ‘Attar’s interpretation of Rabi’ah’s life and portrayal of her gender.

After considering ‘Attar’s presentation of Rabi’ah’s gender, one may further analyze the debate surrounding her gender and how it has been presented throughout time. First, although some argue that Sufis were judged on their spiritual excellence and gender became insignificant, scholars continue to make Rabi’ah’s gender a major issue. As a result, like ‘Attar and Young, scholars continue to construct her gender as “ambiguous” or androgynous. One may assume that this practice of over-analyzing gender would not occur with Hasan of Basra—or any of her other male contemporaries for that matter—especially since it is understood that female saints undergo more scrutiny than their male counterparts (Butorovic 143). In essence, although it seems unlikely that either male or female Sufis were ever perceived as gender-less, Rabi’ah seems to capitalize on the opportunity to use her spiritual superiority, within the perspective of a leveled playing-field, as a potential means to surpass her male “equivalent.” The fact remains, however ambiguous her gender may be portrayed over time, that she has been “immortalized in the writings of men” (El Sakkakini 7).

Writers often employ (and sometimes embellish) famous tropes commonly attributed to Rabi’ah including the biographical trope of slavery, the trope of the lamp (a

14 My hypothesis in chapter three that Rabi’ah may be seen as exhibiting an androgynous role—due to her refusal to accept a feminized or masculinized spiritual path as fully whole—differs greatly from the reasons why scholars have wrestled with her gender identity throughout time. My analysis takes into account Rabi’ah’s critique of social practices related to gender hierarchy and mainstream Muslim worshippers, while I argue that scholars and theologians have revealed her gender as ambiguous to buttress her credibility to a male-dominated audience.
lamp hovering over her head while she stood at night to pray that allegedly led to her release from slavery), and the trope of the “weak woman.” This rhetorical strategy complicates our understanding of Rabi’ah’s ever-evolving and mysterious identity and may inaccurately influence the interpretation of her poetic language. For example, the aforementioned idea of complete reliance on God is also linked, by ‘Attar, to the trope of “woman’s weakness” (Cornell 294). In his portrayal of Rabi’ah, ‘Attar tells the story of her pilgrimage to Mecca and quotes Rabi’ah as saying: “My God, do kings treat a helpless woman this way?...” (Cornell 294). ‘Attar shows Rabi’ah presenting herself as a “helpless,” weak woman—which contrasts with the strength that Rabi’ah consistently exhibits as an individual. One may ask if this is simply ‘Attar showcasing Rabi’ah’s incredible humility towards God, or is this his way of legitimizing her identity to an almost exclusively male audience (by making her weak—the way men commonly perceived women at the time).

V. Conclusion

First I would like to echo Traub’s sentiments regarding my “limitations as an interlocutor,” as I too “come from a Western, white [female] perspective” (31). Not only does my social and cultural location impact my interpretation of Rabi’ah’s sacred language, my voice enters into conversation with other scholars and contributes to Rabi’ah’s ever-evolving identity. As any reader interprets a text the line blurs between author and reader, and I recognize my role in this process and the inevitable production of new meaning.

I also want to call attention to the ambiguities that arise when studying Rabi’ah, her poetry, and how she has been defined by others. First, we must consider the
subjective position of any interpretive activity, specifically with regard to translation of Rabi’ah’s texts. Without knowledge of Arabic and, therefore, the lack of a reading of her poetry in its original language, one must account for the possible loss of meaning as well as the production of particular meanings through translation. Traub describes this inherent reality: “…translation manages its act of transfer and transmission only by also leaving something behind—meanings ‘lost in translation,’ nuance falling by the wayside” (30). Second, all of the biographical information known of Rabi’ah involves both male authorship and male reception, comprising work thus written by men and for men. Butorovic elaborates:

We have no stories told in the first person form, no access to the inner turmoil and compromises to which these women were likely to be subjected as a consequence of the challenging social norms. The women’s voices, then, are mediated voices that resonate with genuine commitment to spiritual self-betterment (Butorovic 141).

These factors must be taken into account because the typical male Muslim experience strongly contrasts with its female counterpart. Consequently, the male experience shapes the author’s presentation of Rabi’ah, and he might accentuate parts or events of her life that may or may not have been highlighted by a female writer, or by Rabi’ah herself for that matter. The same could also be said for an author from the Christian tradition, myself included, analyzing the work of an author from the Muslim tradition.

After considering how male biographers might have related Rabi’ah’s life according to their own social experiences, one must also think about the existing literature on Rabi’ah and the time when it was produced. ‘Attar composed Rabi’ah’s
most extensive biography in the thirteenth century; however, he was not the first to record her life story. Despite the lack of biographical sources, Al-Jahiz first mentions Rabi’ah and reproduces “two statements of hers that demonstrate her asceticism” and her “irrepressible fear of God” (Karamustafa 3). After an entire century of silence, writing on Rabi’ah reappears in the second half of the tenth century, this time with a more fully developed picture of her life (Karamustafa 3). I bring this to light to illustrate the sparse evidence that exists of Rabi’ah’s life. Therefore, determining the facts of her life with certainty becomes, in a sense, problematic.

When trying to historically place Rabi’ah and sort out her life events, one must note the question surrounding the accuracy of Rabi’ah of Basra’s story in relation to the other Rabi’ahs—namely Rabi’ah of Syria and Rabi’ah of Damascus. In “The Legend of Rabi’a of Basra,” Julian Baldick discusses the figure of Rabi’ah of Syria:

As regards Rabi’a of Syria, the materials which we have assembled suggest that she did not exist. Her legend would have arisen as a counterpart to that of Rabi’a of Basra….The apparent existence of the two women with the same name, at about the same time, both claimed by the same Mystical movement (Sufism), one in Iraq, one in Syria, with contrasting lives, would in any case be enough to arouse suspicions as to historicity. (237)

Although Rabi’ah of Syria may be purely legend, the confusion of Basra with other Rabi’ahs complicates her hagiographical profile. Cornell observes how the debate about Rabi’ah’s origins and her portrayal as “non-Arab” by Persian Sufis has led Arab historians to attempt to reclaim her Arab heritage as: “Rabiah the daughter of Isma’il, or that she was an Egyptian” (Cornell 293). This confuses Rabi’ah of Basra with her
namesake, Rabi’ah of Damascus (Cornell 293-294). Stories from the various Rabi’ahs’ lives could be confused or combined, casting a shadow of uncertainty on her life story as we know it today. With this said, what remains of Rabi’ah’s story and identity is the social or ideological “place” (or location) out of which the stories and myths have evolved.

As previously stated, an examination of Rabi’ah’s powerful spiritual poetry in the context of eighth to ninth century Muslim society must include the recognition of the ambiguities surrounding the analysis of her writing. With the evidence at hand, one acknowledges Rabi’ah’s embodiment of a pure love of God, despite the hardships related in her life story. Like other ascetic women who “posited their bodies as a site of social hiatus,” Rabi’ah embraces the isolation characteristic of a Sufi mystic to create space and autonomy for herself (Butorovic 143). By studying the heteroglot quality of Rabi’ah’s sacred language, we come to understand the textual layers of her voice that include (normative) feminine, masculine, and androgynous characteristics. Rabi’ah’s poetry reflects traditional female roles in Muslim society, while simultaneously displaying her own physical control and independence. Through her commitment to God, Rabi’ah manages to escape many of the social constraints stemming from patriarchal practices and interpretations of the Qur’an. Rabi’ah comments on the half-hearted Muslim followers in her society and she communicates the essential awareness of the moment. Rabi’ah’s writing not only creates space for herself as a Muslim woman, it also ensures her place in Muslim history. As a complex individual in a society laced with contradictions, Rabi’ah navigates her way through the male-dominated culture. Butorovic argues that Sufism was “bound to renegotiate the place and role of women
within its teachings and practices” (137). Although Sufism did not completely
reconstruct social understandings of gender, with help from Rabi’ah’s life and poetry,
Sufism “opened new possibilities for articulating alternative, spiritually based
frameworks for gender relations” (137). Rabi’ah is widely regarded as a model of
devotion across faith traditions and recognized for her poetry, and her iconic status
continues to impact worshippers, theologians, and scholars today.
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