


BOOK REVIEW

“Sufi Women, Embodiment, and the ‘Self’: Gender in Islamic Ritual” by Jamila Rodrigues

Jamila Rodrigues *‘Self’: Gender in Islamic Ritual* (London: Routledge, 2023), 184 PP, £125.00 HBK, ISBN 9780367374006

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This book is an ethnographic study of the Sufi ritual practices and embodied experiences among the female members of the Naqshbandi community in Cape Town, South Africa. The specific Sufi ritual in question is *hadra*, often called the “Sacred Dance,” a religious gathering that combines bodily movement, the recitation of sacred texts, and music to achieve closeness to God. The book’s main argument is that *hadra* serves as a somatic platform for Sufi women to express their identity and piety, made visible through their bodies and bodily movements during the ritual.

The underlying issue addressed in this book is the distortion of Islam in Portugal, South Africa, which is often perceived as socially closed, patriarchally violent, and oppressive toward women. Many people, particularly in Western societies, view Muslims as a socially marginalized group and assume that all Muslim women are submissive and less knowledgeable. However, within this community, women play a crucial role. Therefore, Jamila Rodrigues aims to “indirectly” challenge these views by researching and demonstrating how Sufi women actively engage in religious practices, shaping their knowledge, self-concepts, and pious identities through the ritual of *hadra*. For her, this is a form of loyalty to the Sufis and women themselves.

Rodrigues employs an ethnographic methodology with an interdisciplinary approach, encompassing symbolic anthropology, somatic studies, and Islamic Sufism theology. Data was collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews with female members, referred to as Sufi Women, of the Naqshbandi community, primarily in Cape Town, South Africa, with additional data from Lefke, Cyprus.

The book consists of nine chapters, including the introduction. It begins with an introductory chapter that describes Jamila Rodrigues’ background, her interest in Islam, Sufism, and the role of women in the *hadra* ritual. She states that her interest arose from her journey as a dancer and a Muslim anthropologist who was interested in the relationship between the body, culture, and religious expression.

Chapter One, *The Salikun Journey Begins*, explains the book’s scope and briefly describes the Naqshbandi community and the *hadra* ritual in Cape Town. This section is

crucial as it presents the book's central argument, as previously outlined, and describes the stages of analysis that led Rodrigues to this argument.

Chapter Two, *From Theory to Practice*, outlines the theoretical framework, methods, key terms used, and the latest academic literature related to Islamic feminism. It discusses topics such as the embodied practice of rituals, feminist understandings of women's bodily experiences, and the cultural construction of bodily experiences for social control. It also discusses the book's position within various literatures that examine Sufism in cultural, political, physiological, and social contexts.

Chapter Three, *The Inner Islam: An Overview of Sufism and Sufi Notions of the Body*, provides a brief explanation of Sufism as the innermost aspect of Islam, mysticism as something natural, *Dhikr* as the core practice of Sufism, and the body in Sufi discourse. Based on this explanation, Rodrigues argues that in Sufi theological thought, *Dhikr* is closely related to the concept of the body. The Sufi women in Cape Town adopt these theological ideas. However, they understand the body and even recognize the significance of bodily presence and movement in the ritual as secondary compared to the soul, including the mind or knowledge. This presents a problem for Rodrigues, which she attempts to address in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Four, *Dancing with God: Hadra as Sacred Dance and Cultural Embodiment*, analyzes the *hadra* ritual based on "remembering God" and aiming to achieve closeness to the Divine essence. Its practice involves bodily movement, music, and sacred texts to reach a level of religious emotion that connects individuals with God. In some academic works on Sufism, *hadra* is often defined as the "Sacred Dance." According to Rodrigues, the use of the word "dance" has sparked controversy, given the complexity of *hadra*, which involves not only religious aspects such as spirituality but also other aspects such as circle formations concerning space, the recitation of *Dhikr* directly related to sacred texts, and the rhythm of music accompanying the ritual. Therefore, she prefers to use the term "bodily movement expression" in line with the aim of her study.

Based on cultural and anthropological analyses of Sufism, Rodrigues suggests that *hadra* transcends its theological background and is more of a form of cultural behavior. It embraces cultural values, adopts norms, and gives people a sense of religious community. Sufi women in Cape Town show this tendency. Thus, when these Sufi women engage in the ritual, they simultaneously take on the role of cultural agents, particularly within their communal context.

Chapter Five, "De-code" *Hadra: Body Movement Analysis of the Ritual Practice*, provides a detailed analysis of body movements during the *hadra* ritual, combining body movements with Duff's music and oral recitations of *Qasidha (Dhikr)*. Rodrigues maps her analysis into two aspects: external and internal. The external aspect highlights the sacred texts, sound, music, and others involved. These external features form the background for the embodied experiences of the Sufi women. The internal aspect focuses on visual forms, breathing, inner awareness, and emotional moments during the bodily movements in the ritual. She divides it into three stages: beginning, middle, and end. The observed body movements include primarily swinging back and forth toward the circle's center and arm movements, which are this ritual's most emphasized and recognized body movement paths. These internal features become the physical code of *hadra*. Rodrigues argues that through body movements, Sufi women create symbolic values as expressions of religious, moral, and spiritual values.

Chapter Six, *Symbolic Embodied Practice: The Sufi' Mystical Body' and Women's Religious Identity*, critically analyzes the ideas expressed by Sufi women about the embodied experience in the *hadra* ritual. Rodrigues questions how Sufi women

understand bodily experiences and describe them, especially in the final stages of the ritual, as an “Out of Body” experience or a state of physical release, which in Sufi tradition is called *Fan’a*. How do they reflect on such experiences and acknowledge that the body is not separate from the mind? This presents a problem for Rodrigues, the body–mind dichotomy. Therefore, she proposes the idea that, somatically, the body and mind can coexist in a relationship.

However, the Sufi women in Cape Town challenge this notion by validating their experiences, particularly concerning the state of *Fan’a*. They argue that to attain *Fan’a*, one must transcend the body, allowing the soul to be released to encounter God. In this way, according to Rodrigues, these Sufi women take a position that prioritizes Sufi assumptions about the body and dualism in the mind–body relationship. Meanwhile, field data show that when reacting to internal and external stimuli, they articulate bodily movements, which means understanding and giving meaning to their bodies, not merely performing the ritual.

Rodrigues ultimately participated directly in the ritual to substantiate her ideas, not just conducting interviews. She concluded and argued that *hadra* is a ritual focusing on the mind–body relationship that generates embodied experiences to express self-identity and piety. Through *hadra*, Sufi women learn about themselves through their being. Therefore, spiritual knowledge and growth are found in Sufi texts or theological thought and can be acquired through the connection between body and mind.

Rodrigues’ direct involvement in the *hadra* ritual has methodological consequences. The neutrality or objectivity of a researcher, including the research findings, is questioned. However, she manages this problem by employing a method known as auto-ethnography, which allows a researcher to engage with the subject being studied, in other words, to become an insider.

Chapter Seven, “*Let the Bird Fly*” . . . *Somatic Practice and Hadra Performance, the Embodied Experience*, presents the somatic aspect of the *hadra* ritual. After analyzing, using a dance anthropology perspective, every bodily movement in the initial, middle, and final stages, Rodrigues notes that as the body moves, Sufi women process the embodied experience directly while simultaneously feeling and understanding their bodily movements at that moment. Doing and understanding simultaneously can be seen as a somatic approach. She then asserts that *hadra* is a somatic platform where the body and mind intertwine in every bodily movement at that moment, as described by a dance movement therapist: “When we are present in the sensation of the body, we cannot be anywhere else but in the here and now.” This creates a profound connection between the body and religious experience that expresses self-identity and piety.

Chapter Eight, *The Salikun Journey Ends*, outlines the conclusions and reveals the most significant findings of this study: that Sufi women in Cape Town perceive and consider the body and soul as distinct elements and that *hadra* transcends its theological background, serving more as a form of cultural behavior. After explaining the implications of these findings, Rodrigues reaffirms the validation of the main argument presented in her work.

The main strength of this book lies in the thorough field study, providing authentic and detailed insights into the spiritual life of Sufi women in Cape Town. Additionally, a solid interdisciplinary methodology and approach offers a rich analysis of Sufi women’s religious experiences. However, the book’s limitation lies in the scope of its generalization. The research was conducted primarily within the Naqshbandi community in Cape Town, so its findings may only partially represent the experiences of Sufi women in other communities or geographical contexts. Therefore, this book is

more relevant as a case study than a source that can be generalized to all Sufi communities. Furthermore, more needs to be explored of men's experiences. Although this book focuses on women's experiences, understanding men's perspectives can provide additional insights, such as how their experiences differ and, more importantly, how gender dynamics in the *hadra* ritual and within the Naqshbandi community. Additionally, the highly academic writing style may challenge readers without a background in Sufism studies, ethnography, or anthropology. Finally, Rodrigues seems hesitant to confront directly the issues that motivated her research, showing some reluctance in her resistance.

Sufi Women, Embodiment, and the "Self" significantly contribute to Sufism studies. Rodrigues successfully explores how Sufi women use their bodies as tools to express self-identity and piety in this ritual. She also effectively demonstrates her central argument that *hadra* is a somatic platform that functions as a religious ritual and a form of cultural behavior. This book is recommended for students, academics, researchers in gender studies, religious studies, ethnography, anthropology, and anyone interested in Sufism.

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