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Yaghoobi, Claudia. *Subjectivity in 'Attar, Persian Sufism, and European Mysticism*

Bahee Hadaegh

Assistant professor

English Literature, Shiraz University, Iran

bhadaegh@rose.shirazu.ac.ir

Claudia Yaghoobi is an assistant professor of Persian Studies in the department of Asian Studies at the University of North Carolina. Her research concerns the literature of the Middle East, specially focusing on the Persian literary tradition. What stands out in her works is a new outlook she opens up to Persian spiritual, social, and cultural issues. Borrowing from her, I may describe this unique approach in Persian studies as “queering” the queer, that is, how she pinpoints unfamiliar, seemingly abnormal, and marginal cases, and unravels the ironic Sufi method in gaining self-awareness through self-negation. Her recently published book represents her perspective about significant concepts like subjectivity and self in Persian spiritual and socio-cultural realms. She endeavors to introduce the spirit of Persian cultural, social, artistic and religious phenomena by focusing on what I define as a de/reconstructive method where she reintroduces and redefines the cultural phenomena that have been frequently ignored.

Subjectivity in 'Attar, Persian Sufism, and European Mysticism is Yaghoobi's first book project which notably unveils the Persian Sufi figure Farid al-Din 'Attar, revealing a queer image of him in both the strange way

he demonstrates Sufism and the weird characters that he unexpectedly introduces as the prototypes of self-awareness. The book extraordinarily pins down the concepts of transgression, subjectivity and inclusion, putting them both in the framework of Persian Sufi culture and the Western Medieval aura. In a more inclusive attempt, the author remarkably interweaves the medieval past of a Persian poet to Western Medieval figures like Malory or Abelard, and by doing so, to modern notions of self and otherness through re-evaluating these concepts from a theoretical perspective.

Being neatly organized, the book consists of six chapters “Sufism, ‘Aṭṭar, and His Works,” “Modern Theory, Michel Foucault, and His Predecessors,” “Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya and Margery Kempe,” “Maḥmud and Ayāz, Sufi Homoeroticism, and European Same-Sex Relationships,” “Majnūn and Lailā, and Lancelot and Guinevere” and “Shaykh Ṣan‘ān and the Christian Girl, and Abelard and Heloise.” A general introductory chapter and a final concluding section are complementary to the body chapters of the book with two appendices, including an index of the names and author’s profile.

In the first chapter, the author thoroughly explains the origins of Islamic Sufism and follows the history of its expansion to larger territories beyond Arabia (around 750) and to the non-Muslim countries she considers as the “Commonwealth of Islam.” Here, the author historically reviews this stable phase of the Islamic Empire and closely looks into Sufism as thriving by means of the interactions between Christian and Muslim believers leading to the formation of similar incorporated ideas. The author names the first Christian mystical writers belonging to this specific era of influence and continues to add contemporary Persian Muslim mystics including ‘Aṭṭar. This chapter clearly explains ‘Aṭṭar’s milieu, life, spirituality, and works, tracing his basic notion of Sufi love in Platonic and Neoplatonic conceptualizations

of *ephebe*, i.e. beautiful human being. The author's main point here revolves around the specific notion of love as conceived by 'Aṭṭar to be a correspondence between the earthly and the divine. She uniquely deciphers 'Aṭṭar's notion of love through his specific philosophical understanding of the term that suggests inclusion and transgression. Regarding this, the author refers to the less discussed truth of 'Aṭṭar's works which shows a basic pattern for marginalized social members and societal otherness. According to the author, this is explicitly manifested in both 'Aṭṭar's outlandish characters and his language.

Chapter two, which is best situated after the question of 'Aṭṭar's main concern for the inclusion (of the societal otherness), pursues this concept from a philosophical point of view tracing the post-Enlightenment movement of Marquise de Sade (1740-1814) and his focus on naturalness which can be achieved only through transgressive acts and the inclusion of the natural. The author then keenly connects the question of transgression to Bataille's idea of boundaries and limits. This explanation is actually made possible through the detailed description of Sade's and Bataille's fictional characters and their stories in works like *Philosophy in the Bedroom* and *The Story of the Eye*. The chapter, then, reads smoothly to the emergence of popular Western philosophical distinctions between subject and object, self and other leading to Foucault's development of "transgression." It finally concludes that both Foucault and 'Aṭṭar find liberation in transgressing boundaries.

Chapters three, four, five, and six are actually the book's main sections where the author employs a comparative close reading of selected Medieval texts from 'Aṭṭar's works and their counterparts in Medieval Europe. She proposes that unlike the common view of social, religious, or cultural norms, and in contrast to rigid repressive policies, these stories ironically reveal queer

characters who represent various kinds of transgressions. The author contends that by transgressing the laws of society, religion, or culture, these extraordinary characters are able to define an alternative subjectivity or identity for themselves. From among such transgressions, the author brings an example of gender reformation in the story of the first female Sufi in ‘Aṭṭar’s *Tadhkirat al-Awliyā* (*Memoirs of the Saints*). The story of Mahmūd and Ayāz is also surveyed to depict another queer manifestation of breaking social codes in endorsing homoeroticism. The author once again initiates a theoretical conversation between Foucault and ‘Aṭṭar and concludes that this violation of standards leads to self-transcendence. The story of Majnūn and Lailā, and Shaykh San‘ān are other emblematic narratives by ‘Aṭṭar that Yaghoobi explicates in order to interpret the violation of cultural and religious prohibitions which subvert the identity of title characters and offer them inward transformation through the jouissance of taboos. The European counterpart stories by Margery Kempe and those of Lancelot and Guinevere are parallel examinations of the main idea the author explores.

The concluding chapter recapitulates the philosophical discussion which I dare call “queering” the queer. By this, I mean the eccentric unveiling of the image of a deconstructive Persian mystic poet, ‘Aṭṭar, and his queer characters, including outcasts, transgressors, and social pariahs who are consciously and peculiarly included by him, the Sufi poet who willingly disturbs the dominant status quo. The key question of inclusion is remarkably affirmed in this concluding chapter through the complementary discussion of more stories in ‘Aṭṭar’s narratives by focusing on otherness and its relationship with self. The author concludes that although otherness normally attracts exclusion, the unique way ‘Aṭṭar represents otherness, is specifically inclusive and finally transcending. Such a peculiar reading by the author is

made possible through a comparative dialogue she creates between modern critics working on contemporary theories of transgression, othering, taboo, and inclusion, and the philosophers proceeding them.

Although more comparative studies on Persian mysticism have already been published specifically on the question of self and transcendence, Yaghoobi's study is distinguished by her wise employment of methodology. The second chapter on methodology, to me, is the towering achievement of the author as it reflects the comparative way of fusing literature with theory, and more importantly, the medieval past with the modern present.