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## **Sexual Trauma and the Spiritual Experiences: Rabi'a al-A'dawiyya and Margery Kempe**

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### **Abstract**

Rabi'a al-A'dawiyya (717-801 A.D.) the first female Sufi in the Muslim world, who introduced the concept of 'love' into mysticism, was popular for her witticism, sharp reprimands of her contemporary male Sufis and her gender-bending practices. In 'Attar's *Tadhkirat al-Awliya*, Rabi'a is portrayed as a challenger of the established gender norms of her day. Rabi'a's crossing of gender boundaries and her mysticism presented in 'Attar's works can be regarded as defense mechanisms employed against her experience of exploitation as a slave and for the sake of necessity to transcend her limited gender identity and feminine sexuality as well as her inability to reach liberation that she longed for. In order to get a more nuanced view of female mystics' gender transgression, I will also examine similar gender transgression in Rabi'a's Christian counterpart, the English Margery Kempe (1373-1438). Margery is known for having written *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Margery's public expression of spirituality as a laywoman was unusual compared to the more traditional holy exemplars of her time. Margery's spiritual career began past her traumatic childbirth experience which resulted in her developing abject feelings about femininity and motherhood. The book shows Margery, like Rabi'a in her days, crossing gender boundaries of her time and reshaping her identity so as to re-enter the world as a new subject. I argue that the power of divine love and the encounter with the divine Other allowed these two women to transgress gender boundaries, de- and reconstruct their

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**identities through annihilation of their self, rediscover the ultimate Reality, and unite with the divine.**

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### **Introduction**

Rabi'a al-A'dawiyya gained considerable recognition throughout the Muslim World as the first female Sufi who introduced love into the Islamic mystical tradition. Rabi'a was born in what is now Basra, Iraq in the year 717 A.D. At a very young age, she was orphaned. Later, she was taken captive and sold into slavery. As a slave, she devoted her time to praying and contemplation. After a while, her master freed her and thereafter she continued her spiritual path as an ascetic. She is considered the first Sufi to have incorporated divine love as an essential component in her spirituality. She was also popular for her witticism, sharp reprimands of her contemporary male Sufis and her gender-bending practices. Many have written about this historical figure; however, one of the most complete accounts can be found in Farid al-Din 'Attar's *Tadhkirat al-Awliya*.

This paper proposes that contrary to the common view of Muslim women as subservient and passive, in 'Attar's *Tadhkirat al-Awliya*, Rabi'a is portrayed as a challenger of the established gender norms of her day. In 'Attar's works, she is depicted as a freedwoman who refuses all worldly pleasures, such as marriage, and is a very harsh admonisher of men. In *Tadhkirat al-Awliya*, she is also characterized as a desexualized person, perhaps as a result of her physical, emotional and sexual exploitation which, though common in the medieval master-slave relationships in Islam, could have serious implications. Having abandoned emotions and sensitivities known as stereotypically feminine at that time in order to escape her traumatic experiences of being sexually exploited, she takes refuge in God and Sufism according to 'Attar. Rabi'a's crossing of gender boundaries and her mysticism presented in 'Attar's works can therefore be regarded as defense mechanisms employed against her experience of exploitation as a slave and for the sake of necessity to transcend her limited gender identity and feminine sexuality as well as her inability to reach liberation that she longed for.

In order to get a more nuanced view of female mystics' gender transgression, I will also examine similar gender transgression in the spiritual

legacy of Rabi'a's Christian counterpart, the English Margery Kempe (1373-1438). Although Rabi'a and Margery lived nearly six centuries apart and belonged to two different spiritual and religious traditions, much of what 'Attar writes about Rabi'a's gender transgression and its relation to her emotional, psychological and spiritual experience can be found in the accounts of Margery's spiritual path in *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

Margery Kempe is known for having written *The Book of Margery Kempe*, albeit not without the help of her scribes. In this book, she chronicles her numerous pilgrimages to holy sites as well as her mystical conversations with Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary and Saint Anne. She also describes the tensions that existed in late medieval England between institutional orthodoxy and public modes of religious expression, such as Lollardy. Margery was born Margery Brunham in King's Lynn, Norfolk, in England. She married a Norwich man named John Kempe and had 14 children with him. Margery's public expression of spirituality as a laywoman was unusual compared to the more traditional holy exemplars of her time, such as Julian of Norwich who was a cloistered anchoress. All along her spiritual path, as depicted in the book, Margery was challenged by both church and civil authorities for her alleged deviation from the teachings of the institutional Church; however, she proved her orthodoxy in each and every case. Margery's spiritual career began past her traumatic childbirth experience which resulted in her developing abject feelings about femininity and motherhood. *The book* shows Margery, like Rabi'a in *Tadhkirat al-Awliya*, crossing gender boundaries of her time and reshaping her identity so as to re-enter the world as a new subject. In these works, both Rabi'a and Margery turn to divine love as a way to heal their earthly wounds. I argue that the power of divine love and the encounter with the divine Other, depicted in these works, allowed the two women to transgress gender boundaries, de- and reconstruct their identities through annihilation of their self, rediscover the ultimate Reality, and unite with the divine. Before proceeding to the comparative analysis of 'Attar's *Tadhkirat al-Awliya* and Margery's *The Book of Margery Kempe* we shall first look at the historical background of the medieval Middle Eastern and European gender paradigms.

### Medieval Gender Paradigms

The Mediterranean Middle East used to practice Christianity before Islam. The Church emphasized the significance of transcending the earthly and bodily and valued female virginity and sexual purity. The dominant belief was that women were essentially biological beings and vessels for reproduction. Female celibacy was valued; however, the consequent independence it would grant women was seen as challenge to male authority (Ahmed, *Women and Gender* 24; see also Keddie, *Women in Middle*; Najmabadi *Women With Moustaches*). Female body was therefore viewed as shameful and sex was allowed merely for procreation. Hence, female body was to be veiled (35).

After its emergence in the seventh-century, Islam identified with the Judeo-Christian monotheism of the region. Islam incorporated the existing dominant scriptural misogyny into its socio-religious world (Ahmed, *Women and Gender* 36). After the Arab conquests, wealth and slaves poured into the Muslim communities of Arabia. Most of the slaves were women who were dependent members of the Persian Sassanian harem (224AD-651AD). Muslim elites owned thousands of slaves; even ordinary soldiers had a few to serve them. Because of the slave market, women were treated as commodities and had little power over their sexual, psychological and emotional lives. Male masters owned, rented or sold them (80). The expressions 'woman', 'slave' and 'object for sexual use' became synonymous. This trend was prevalent in Iraq, Rabi'a's home country, where the Sassanian Empire was located. Rabi'a lived most of her life in such conditions.

Challenging the established norms of gender relations in Islam was one of the major goals of Sufi movements that emerged during the Abbasid era (750-1258). By simply allowing women to practice religion and maintain control over their sexuality, the Sufis affirmed the importance of the spiritual over biological (Ahmed, *Women and Gender* 66). Piety, asceticism, renunciation of materialism, emphasis on celibacy and rejection of unbridled male sexuality had political dimensions as well. In this way, Sufis wanted to manifest their opposition to the government and religious establishment (95-6). Sufi ethos countered that of the dominant society. Sufis demonstrated that gender arrangements were social decisions. Rejecting the gender arrangements of the

dominant part of the society, Sufis honored the contribution of female spiritual leaders, such as Rabi'a.

Similarly, the medieval British society would constrain the female voice. Women were classified, on the one hand, based on their marital status and relation to men as maidens, wives or widows, and on the other hand, in conformance with the binary opposition of the sacred Virgin Mary versus the tainted Eve. Maidenhood, wifehood and widowhood largely acquired their meaning based on women's subordination to masculine authority. This subordination was, of course, influenced by the Church which both limited "women's authority as wives and [expanded] it as virgins and visionaries" (Williams 2).

Several significant historical and social events, such as the development of affective piety and increasing lay control over marriage, played important roles in the late medieval British history. These changes opened avenues for new female roles and new ways of thinking about and describing femininity. With the growth of affective piety and the emphasis on personal communication with the divine, both married and single women found more authority. Women no longer had to be nuns or anchoresses to be considered spirituals. They could integrate their spiritual devotions into their secular everyday lives (Williams 5).

However, fourteenth-century England was not yet completely familiar with the cults of female ecstatic piety and public expression of spirituality that were popular in Europe at the time. In the meantime, Lollardy was also at its heights. The Lollards were the followers of Wycliffe who advocated lay preaching and believed that everybody could interpret the scriptures if they were translated into the vernacular. Regardless of the substantial number of nuns and anchoresses, laywomen like Margery who chose a singular vocation of charity, pilgrimage, fasting, penance, chaste living, preaching and teaching and were popular for their public trances, visions and ecstasy were viewed as eccentric transgressors. Margery's knowledge of the scriptures as a laywoman and her preaching aroused feelings of antagonism and provoked the possibility of being called a heretic.

Late medieval spirituality was therefore impacted by the increase in transformation of women's roles which were previously fundamentally limited to the private domain of domesticity. A great number of laywomen were

attracted to spirituality which could assist them to move out of the private domain of household to the public sphere of religiosity. The era was highly influenced by the rise of heretical challenges to the Church authority and the great number of pilgrimages taken by pious women (Bynum, *Holy feast* 16-20). These historical and social developments raised questions about the existing meanings and models of womanhood in late medieval Britain.

Both Rabi'a as a freed female slave in 'Attar's *Tadhkirat al-Awliya* and Margery as a mother/wife in *The Book* were expected to be confined to the private domain of medieval domesticity. They were both impacted by the patriarchal worlds in which they lived and whose demarcations could only be crossed by those ready to displace the authorities. Medieval societies (Muslim as well as Christian) desired to reproduce their forms through prescribing to women what was believed to be their due place. However, since gender poses restriction on possibilities and alternatives, many women including Rabi'a and Margery, have been portrayed in writings to have felt compelled to challenge the dominant gender inequality and injustice. This non-conformity was seen as deviation. Now we will turn to 'Attar's *Tadhkirat al-Awliya* and Margery's *The Book of Margery Kempe* in order to see how they overcame their traumatic feelings through spirituality, faced gender-related issues, and challenged the authorities.

### Sexuality and Trauma

In 'Attar's *Tadhkirat al-Awliya*, there are several passages about Rabi'a's femininity where she is portrayed as a desexualized human. I suggest that the reason for this representation was her life experience as a slave. Thus, we shall first have a look at her life and explore the possible reasons for this way of depiction. 'Attar writes that she was an orphaned child whose mother and father died; then a famine occurred after which she was separated from her sisters,

در بصره قحطی افتاد و خواهران متفرق شدند رابعه بیرون رفت ظالمی او را بدید و بگرفت بس بشش درم بفروخت.

a great famine occurred in Basra. The sisters were separated, and Rabe'a fell into the hands of a wicked man who sold her for a few dirhams.<sup>1</sup>

(TK 60)

Using the term *zalim* for the description of this man emphasizes his wickedness in the Persian narrative. Dihkhuda's *Lughat-nama* (dictionary) defines the term *zalim* as an oppressor or tyrant. Reading this narrative, one may feel compelled to ask the following questions: who is this wicked man, how does Rabi'a fall into his hands, and how does he treat Rabi'a before he objectifies her by selling her like a commodity?

Commodification of slaves, male or female, was, of course, not unprecedented in medieval Muslim societies. As Janet Afary writes, "A male slave (*gholam*) and a female slave (*Kaniz*) could be sold, exchanged, rented, inherited, or owned by several masters" (55). As mentioned earlier, following the Islamic conquests of the Middle East and the economic growth during the Abbasid dynasty (750-1258), women's confinement and seclusion was further intensified. This economic expansion allowed the presence of domestic female slaves in Islamic society and sanctioned sexual relations between female slaves and their masters (Nashat and Tucker 52-4). On female slavery, Nikki Keddie writes, "Slaves were often sexually subject to their masters. Although slavery was less onerous than, say, in the New World, it still entailed a lack of freedom and a sexual subjugation that were more severe than those experienced by free women" ("Introduction" 11). Keddie's comment highlights the fact that the concept of sexual abuse might not have existed in the medieval period in its present meaning, and the exploitation might have been taken for granted as part of a female slave's duty to her owner. Nevertheless, as Keddie adds, the lack of freedom that they experienced in general and physical slavery that they underwent in particular did intensify the oppressiveness of the conditions for female slaves.

On Rabi'a's slavery, 'Attar briefly comments that her master put her to long and hard work. While 'Attar does not provide us with detailed information on Rabi'a's life as a slave, which is something to question, Jennifer Heath writes that at the time of the sale exchange, Rabi'a was eleven and very pretty.

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<sup>1</sup> (ed. Nicholson ٦٠) (trans. Losensky 98-9)

Her master taught her to sing and play oud and flute so that she could perform at parties and weddings. The demand for Rabi'a was high because there was "something in her songs that lifts hearts. She is singing to her Beloved" (Heath 171). After a while, Heath tells that Rabi'a's own heart is awakened, and she begins praying and fasting and refuses to perform in public for which her master beats her severely. Then one night the master wakes up while Rabi'a is praying and sees light above her head illuminating the entire house. He gets scared and frees her the next day (172). This narrative shows that in addition to possibly being exploited by the wicked man and commodified at the sale exchange, Rabi'a was physically exploited during her slavery through long hours of hard labor. Even though there is no solid textual evidence as to her being sexually exploited as well, considering that "Slave owners also had easy sexual access to their *kanizes* or *gholams*," one might find sexual exploitation likely in her case as well (Afary 55). Heath's reference to long hours of strenuous physical labor and non-consensual singing and dancing in public might be enough to testify to physical and emotional exploitation.

In *Tadhkirat al-Awliya*, Rabi'a's emotional insecurity is emphasized in the narrative right after her slavery sale transaction is complete. 'Attar portrays Rabi'a as a helpless child at the mercy of a *na-mahram* (a male stranger). She runs away, falls down and breaks her hand; and this is the moment when she is shown communicating with God and asking for help,

یک روز می‌گذشت نامحرمی در پیش آمد رابعه بگریخت و در راه بیفتاد و دستش از جای بشد روی بر خاک نهاد و گفت بار خدایا غریبم و بی مادر و پدر یتیم و اسیرمانده و ببنده و دست‌گسسته و مرا ازین غمی نیست الا رضاء تو می‌بایدم که دانم که تو راضی هستی یا نه.

One day on the street, she fled from a stranger. She fell and broke her hand. She put her face on the ground and said, 'My God, I am homeless without mother and father. I am a captive, and my hand is broken. None of this saddens me. All I need is for you to be pleased with me, to know whether you are pleased with me or not. (TK 60)

What makes Rabi'a so frightened by this stranger in this narrative? Does Rabi'a observe, experience or undergo something so repulsive, coming from this or

some other male stranger that makes her flee? If we consider the meaning that Dihkhuda provides for the word *na-mahram*, which can roughly be translated as impudence or shamelessness – used frequently in sexual contexts – we might assume that Rabi'a was frightened because she had been sexually assaulted.

Victims of physical and sexual assault usually experience long-lasting impact on their lives. They undergo phases of identity confusion, loss of trust, feelings of guilt, loss of self-esteem, and have difficulty forming intimate relationships. Brison, a victim of sexual assault herself, writes about sexual violence, its aftermath, the skepticism, and the disintegration of the self that the victims may experience (“Surviving” 13). According to Heath, having obtained her freedom, Rabi'a proceeds to sing and dance for a while, which was a job taken by prostitutes at the time. Can we suggest that that was the phase of identity loss and confusion for her? Later, she feels guilty and repents. After the repentance, 'Attar draws a picture of Rabi'a as a devout worshipper of God. Her strict and disciplined mysticism and her lack of interest in any intimate relationships can be related to her debilitating experiences as a female slave.

Rabi'a's traumatic experience with sexuality as a slave and her consequent departure on the path of spirituality in *Tadhkirat al-Awliya* can be compared to those of her English counterpart, although in a different context. Reading Margery's book, one cannot miss the fact that while the book is full of references to her father and her husband, there is no mention of her mother; and there is insufficient information about her children, except for her very first childbirth in Book One and the prodigal son in Book Two. Margery never talks about her maternal emotions or duties, and *The Book* presents her first childbirth as a crucial moment of crisis in her life. Why does Margery, either consciously or unconsciously, avoid any references to the female figures in her life? Why does she not allude to any of her children, and her own maternal bond with them? After all, what is so controversial about femininity that Margery endeavored to embrace it by her own experience of childbirth and reenactment of the Virgin's and Saint Anne's later in her visions - and shun it by avoiding any reference to the female figures in her life at the same time?

Reflecting on Margery's feelings about femininity during and after her experience of childbirth, one thing seems certain, and it is the great impact that the traditional Christian notions of female body had on Margery. These

traditions identified women with the corporeal, and therefore inferior, and men with the spiritual and intellectual, and therefore superior. The idea of inferiority of female body, its permeability and unreliability was mainly derived from the Apostle Paul, Saint Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux and Aristotle. Some of the most widespread notions about the inferiority of feminine body revolved around the concept of Eve's temptation and fall and women's sexual physiology. In Europe, medieval women were therefore considered corporeal and sensual; they bore "the taint of Eve" (Lochrie 19-27; Bynum, *Holy feast* 15-6, 261-2; Voaden 7-40).

Margery's experience with femininity and motherhood began with her pregnancy and childbearing, as shown in *The Book*, which was an onerous one. She "labowrd wyth grett accessys" / "labored with great attacks of illness" until the child was born (*The Book* 6).<sup>2</sup> Her choice of the term "labowrd" which signifies the duration of labor until the childbirth and the word "grett" which in addition to "great" also translates as "distressing or grievous" in the *Medieval English Dictionary* emphasizes the traumatic impact of childbirth on her. In Jennifer Hellwarth's words, this distressing impact of childbirth on Margery "was common among women of medieval and early modern Europe and was grounded in infant and maternal mortality rates" (46).

However, a more religious interpretation can also be suggested because immediately after her laborious childbirth Margery "sent for hyr gostly fadyr," / "sent for her ghostly father" so that she could confess a "thyng" – a vice or a sin, according to the MED – tormenting her, but her confessor silenced her before she could confess (*The Book* 6). In the theological context of the medieval period, the tormenting sin that Margery refers to but never talks about explicitly relates to Margery's internalization of the medieval notions of femininity, female reproduction, female carnality and Eve's fall from Grace (*Genesis* 3:16). Most of all, however, it is reminiscent of Saint Augustine's suggestion (in *City of God*) that sex for mere pleasure and excitement causes the mind to be oblivious of God and is therefore a sin (577). This sense of sinfulness and the need for confession come to her only after marriage, sexual experience and childbearing, as mentioned in *The Book*: "Sche had a thyng in conscyens which sche had nevyr schewyd befor that tyme in alle hyr lyfe. /

<sup>2</sup> (eds. Meech and Allen) (trans. Staley)

She had a thing in conscience which she had never shown before that time in all her life" (6-7). *The Book* illustrates how Margery, possibly associating herself with Eve, temptation and fall feels strong awareness of a deep chasm created by that "thyng" between her and the divine. Hellwarth suggests that this "thyng" tormenting Margery could be caused by fear of death following childbirth because of high mortality rates of the time (46); therefore it can also be suggested that Margery felt the urge to repent of her supposed sin before dying. Whatever the reason, the opening birth scene "illustrates well the emotional and spiritual travails that come with pregnancy and childbirth" (46-7).

The fact that Margery cannot name this "thyng" while the confessor insists that she keep quiet about it also suggests that this "thyng" is possibly something beyond language. Perhaps the confessor fears the "thyng" and wants it to be kept out of language. In fact, Margery intends to name the "thyng" – namely, free female sexuality – which has not been articulated publicly before and has no place in publicly accepted language and law. And, insofar as it has never been written down in the text, it is beyond language, too.

This "thyng" is, of course, the word that Lacan uses in his contemplation of the 'Real' in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Examining the psychoanalytical aspects of the "thing", it may seem necessary to make reference to Jacques Lacan's essay "*Das Ding*" in which he elaborates on the concept of the "thing" in psychoanalytical terms, based on the Freudian Pleasure and Reality Principles. Freud's Pleasure Principle dominating the id states that we are ruled by the desire for pleasure, the urge to satisfy our physical and psychological needs, and to avoid pain. Lacan maintains that when "the signifying structure interposes itself between perception and consciousness ... the unconscious intervenes ... the pleasure principle intervenes" ("*Das Ding*" 51). However, strong domination of the Pleasure Principle can only occur early in life; when the subject becomes mature, the Reality Principle, because of the 'exigencies of life', redefines gratification of pleasure sought by the Pleasure Principle. This desire is, of course, balanced by the ego, "On that basis there enters into play what we will see function as the first apprehension of reality by the subject. And it is at this point that that reality intervenes, which has the most intimate relationship to the subject, the *Nebenmensch*. The formula is striking to the extent that it expresses powerfully the idea of beside yet alike, separation and identity" (51). *Nebenmensch*, a German term meaning 'neighbor', introduced

by Freud as the unconscious, is “separated into two parts, one of which affirms itself through an unchanging apparatus, which remains together as a thing, *als Ding*” (51). Therefore, through encountering *Nebenmensch* the subject is isolated from the *Ding* and seeks to find it again; however, “what is supposed to be found cannot be found again. It is in its nature that the object as such is lost. It will never be found again. This lost object is the *das Ding*, that is, it is “the absolute Other of the subject” (52). Therefore, considering the psychoanalytic definition of the “thing” or *das Ding*, which is only one of many interpretations of the “thing”, it can be inferred that Margery experienced jouissance, desiring the Absolute Other – the mother or primary caregiver of a child – who is lost forever. Experiencing jouissance for her primary caregiver or for the Absolute Other, Margery first feels joy, then guilty, then suffers previously unknown pain and needs to repent. Whether in psychological or theological terms, one thing is certain: “the thing” is a reminiscence of what is lost and cannot be found again – be it the Lacanian Absolute Other, the Biblical Grace from which Eve fell, female sexual freedom, or any other lost thing.

Margery’s first experience of intimate interaction with the divine begins after the “emotional and spiritual travails” of her first childbirth, her feelings of guilt and the need for repentance when she is in bed with her husband, hearing sweet heavenly songs for the first time and expressing regret for having committed sins (*The Book* 11). The stark contrast between the heavenly song that she hears and the supposed sins she committed bespeaks the extent to which Margery internalized the prevalent beliefs about femininity and represents her spiritual longing. Therefore, unsurprisingly, past such a traumatic experience Margery avoids speaking about femininity and female figures in her life, even midwives. Yet she utilizes her abject feminine body by “embrac[ing] [her] femaleness,” (Bynum, *Holy feast* 163) and “not by reversing what she is but by being more fully herself with Christ” (Bynum, *Fragmentation* 41) in order to redefine her femininity in a more subjective manner.

The traumatic experience that Margery details in *The Book* is immensely different from what Rabi’a endures in ‘Attar’s *Tadhkirat al-Awliya*; however, the marks left on these women by each respective experience led them onto the spiritual path where love of the divine Other empowered them to cross the confining boundaries of their gender and overcome trauma. Rabi’a’s spiritual

path is strewn with constant refusals of marriage proposals, while Margery's spiritual journey lies in her desire to stay celibate inside her marriage.

### Crossing Gender Boundaries

In *Tadhkirat al-Awliya*, 'Attar refers to several marriage proposals to Rabi'a, including al-Hasan Basri's, and her subsequent rejections. The marriage proposals to Rabi'a confirm the socio-cultural expectations of her time, presuming that a woman should not remain celibate because she is not capable of managing her life alone. There are other narratives about those marriage proposals and refusals which cannot be found in 'Attar's work. 'Abd al-Wahid b. Zayd, who was renowned for the asceticism and sanctity of his life, was one of her suitors. Although 'Abd al-Wahid was an ascetic and pious man himself, Rabi'a refuses his proposal by saying, "O sensual one, seek another sensual like thyself. Hast thou seen any sign of desire in me?" (al-Makkī 57). It is noteworthy, however, that Rabi'a does not renounce the concept of marriage itself, even though she rejects 'Abd al-Wahid's proposal because of its sensuality. In fact, she condemns earthly "desire", as the case of al-Hasan's proposal illustrates. Sensuality for Rabi'a seems to signify fulfillment of one's own desires. It is the attention given to one's ego which has no place in the realm of the divine.

Margaret Smith also relates several anecdotes about Rabi'a's refusals to enter the bond of matrimony. According to one of these stories, Muhammad b. Suliyman al-Hashimi, the Abbasid Amir of Basra, offers Rabi'a a dowry of a hundred thousand dinars and informs her that he has an income of ten thousand dinars monthly that he will bestow entirely on her. Rabi'a replies, "It does not please me that you should be my slave and that all you possess should be mine, or that you should distract me from God for a single moment" (qtd. in Smith, *Rabi'ā* 10). The Abbasid Amir blatantly offers Rabi'a worldly wealth, commodifying her and devaluing the institution of marriage. Rabi'a views his proposal as a distraction from the divine. Rabi'a's refusal in this narrative is an indication of her union with the divine and the spiritual marriage that she has contracted with the Beloved.

All these writings show that Rabi'a's rejection of marriage proposals can be perceived as ramification of her extremely disheartened feelings about

earthly love and her frustration about the predicament of her childhood as a slave. ‘Attar shows how, having been bereft of sincere human love, Rabi‘a turns to God and puts all her trust in Him. Therefore, as we can see in *Tadhkirat al-Awliya*, Rabi‘a’s circumventing of earthly love, seen as a doorway to divine love, illustrates her transgression of the Sufi philosophy of contemplating divine beauty in its earthly form.

We can register similar desire for spiritual marriage in Margery’s life in *The Book* when she seeks celibacy inside marriage. Admittedly, marital intercourse was considered less culpable if it was performed for conceiving a child, paying the conjugal debt or as a remedy to fornication. Nevertheless, since the medieval Christian perceptions about female sexuality played crucial role in Margery’s attitudes towards herself and her body, she sought chastity within her marriage for years. Finally, having had fourteen children, Margery succeeded in achieving it by going before the bishop with her husband and taking a vow of chastity (*The Book* 115).

Celibacy in marriage in medieval Europe was a matter of much confusion. Sexual intercourse was one of the most considerable domains where husbands could assert their authority over their wives. Since the desire to be freed from the burden of conjugal debt evoked fear in her husband, and the “transition from a carnal to a spiritual marriage” undermined his authority, thus threatening the masculine domain of both the canonists and the husband, Margery was denied that freedom (Elliot, *Spiritual* 245). Much like Rabi‘a’s refusal to marry in previous narratives, Margery’s request was seen as a deviation of a woman from expectations of the society.

Ultimately, Margery reaches an agreement with her husband through financial negotiation regarding the payment of his debts, which sheds light on the late medieval European notions of female body as a commodity to be traded. Although not a slave, we read in *The Book* that Margery goes through the process of commodification in her marital life after she asks for celibacy inside marriage, similar to Rabi‘a’s experience of slave transaction, and later, of the marriage proposals that she received in *Tadhkirat al-Awliya*. Whereas Margery can negotiate her freedom, Rabi‘a, as a slave, cannot. It is only after the divine intervention that Rabi‘a’s master and Margery’s husband agree to

grant them the freedom they long for. In both cases, however, the two women and their bodies are commodified by the presence of financial exchange.

Both Rabi'a who is depicted as refusing marriage proposals in these writings and Margery who seeks a spiritual marriage in *The Book* move out of the familiar space of marriage and marital intimacy into an unknown sphere where they seem to be reconstructing the concept of marriage and deconstructing the socially accepted meaning of "womanhood." In fact, they are undoing the structures that produced the binaries of womanhood and manhood. Rabi'a's and Margery's ventures of personal communication with God and their attainment of self-awareness as women remind us of Pierre Bourdieu's comment that "when the conditions of existence of which the members of a group are the product are very little differentiated, the dispositions which each of them exercises in his practice are confirmed and hence reinforced both by the practice of the other members of the group ... and also by institutions which constitute collective thought as much as they express it" (167). 'Attar's *Tadhkirat al-Awliya* and Margery Kempe's *The Book* illustrate that Rabi'a and Margery encounter numerous obstacles and are constantly questioned about their spirituality and life choices because they have chosen a vocation which is immensely different from the dispositions of other women in their societies. Their uniqueness conveys messages of non-conformity and threat to the socio-religious authorities of their time.

### **Union with the Divine**

Regardless of the opposition that they face with regard to the earthly matters, we read in the narratives that Rabi'a and Margery find themselves in full harmony with the divine. To highlight Rabi'a's union with the divine, 'Attar portrays her in *Tadhkirat al-Awliya* as an orthodox believer observing her prayers, fasting constantly and refusing to waste a single moment contemplating earthly desires. The communication between Rabi'a and God is illustrated in an anecdote out of *Tadhkirat al-Awliya* where, in a state of illumination, Rabi'a receives an order from God to renounce all worldly matters. 'Attar writes that a visitor brings Rabi'a a bowl of food which she accepts and goes to fetch a lamp. When she comes back, she finds that a cat has spilled the bowl. She goes to fetch a jug so that she can break her fast but when

she returns, the lamp has gone out. She tries to drink the water in the dark but the jug slips from her hand and is broken. She asks God what is happening to her, and God replies that suffering and bliss cannot co-exist. If she wants to walk on the divine path, she must suffer (TK 69). When Rabi'a hears this, she cuts off her heart completely from all worldly desires, and for the last thirty years of her life she prays every time as if it were her last prayer. This compliance and union with the divine allows her to circumvent earthly demarcations and emerge as a new subject. This is a moment of ultimate fusion of the self with the divine Other.

For Margery, this discovery and fusion occur through interacting with Christ, the Virgin Mary and Saint Anne during her *imitatio Christi*. The dominant imagery in Margery's book is that of the motherhood of Virgin Mary and Saint Anne who "symbolize for Margery the perfect spiritual maternal paradigm – immaculate conception, virginal and painless birth, and the promise of resurrection" (Bynum, *Holy feast* 49). According to *The Book*, Margery's path begins with Christ encouraging her "to thynke on [his] modyr, for sche is cause of alle the grace that [Margery has]." / "think on [his] mother, for she is the cause of all the grace that [Margery has]" (18). Contemplating the Virgin Mary, Margery then observes Saint Anne's pregnancy and asks to be her maiden: "Seynt Anne gret wyth chylde, and than sche preyd Seynt Anne to be hir mayden and hir servawnt. / Saint Anne great with the child, and then she prayed Saint Anne if she could be her maiden and her servant" (18). Margery not only thinks about the Virgin Mary as the mother of Christ but envisions the pregnancy of Saint Anne with the Virgin. The fact that she desires to be the 'maiden' and 'servant' of Saint Anne at the time of her pregnancy ironically questions her being alone during her own childbirth. Moreover, the maternal bond which is left ambivalent in Margery's book is intensified by her longing to nurse the Virgin Mary's child: "Also sche beggyd owyr Lady fayr whyte clothys and kerchys for to swathyn in hir sone whan he wer born, and, whan Jhesu was born sche ordeyned beddyng for owyr Lady to lyg in wyth hir blyssed sone./Also she begged for our Lady fair white clothes and kerchiefs to swaddle her son when he was born, and when Jesus was born, she prepared bedding for our Lady to lie in with her blessed son" (19). Margery's spiritual

encounter with Christ, the Virgin Mary, and Saint Anne opens up the possibility for her to reconcile with her own sexuality and motherhood.

Therefore, despite the fact that Margery avoids mentioning her own maternal bond with her children in *The Book*, she is drawn into the larger world of maternal discourse with the Virgin Mary and Saint Anne as the symbolic mothers of all humankind. It seems that Margery crossed the limit of private motherhood to enter the public realm and mother the entire humanity. Thus, Margery's moments of ecstasies in *The Book*, focusing mostly on the Passion of Christ and infused with images of motherhood, grant her "a new source of power and sanctity" through which she is enabled to cross the accepted gender lines, undergo the process of self-shaping and emerge as a new subject (Lochrie 13).

In what we discussed, we saw that 'Attar shows how Rabi'a's slavery and her social status influence her spirituality and help her in the reconstruction of her identity through her spiritual rediscovery of the divine Other. Similarly, in *The Book*, we saw that Margery's social status and upbringing, and her internalization of the notions of medieval Christian theology about female body influences her to redefine her subjectivity through spirituality. Revisiting the writings on Rabi'a and Margery and their spirituality, we see how they are portrayed as moving out of the realm of pre-constructed law and language where for instance marriage was expected from a Muslim woman such as Rabi'a, and preaching was forbidden for a Christian laywoman such as Margery. Through this movement, they are represented as facing personal experiences, which endow them with a new self and enable them to re-enter the realm of law and language with a new perception and confidence, asserting themselves through their love of the divine. Their most significant accomplishment is depicted in giving voice to what was unthinkable before; that is, female autonomy. Their singular trajectory is a representation of the temporality of all worldly constructed territories, all boundaries, and all limits.

Due to their frustration with men, Rabi'a and Margery are depicted turning to God in order to transcend the existing gender hierarchies. According to the texts, Rabi'a's and Margery's gender identity and femininity correspond directly to their desire to avoid lack and seek perfection in turning to the all-powerful. However, this desire turns out to be illusory, and mysticism, as

Simone de Beauvoir argues, is just another extension of the same limited sexuality and gender identity. This desire is closely associated with sexual difference and the unconscious, in Lacan's words. To Lacan, the kind of body (female or male) that one possesses does not determine one's position in language; rather, it is one's relationship to the phallus, "the transcendental signifier within male-dominant society through which meaning is fixed and grounded" that predetermines one's position (Hollywood, *Sensible* 154). Lacan sees women's mysticism and subjectivity in close association with their lack of the phallus and the desire to fill in the lack, "for desire merely leads us to aim at the gap where it can be demonstrated that the One is based only on the essence of the signifier" (Lacan, *Encore* 5). Since women bear the burden of the lack of the signifier/phallus more than men, from a psychological point of view they lack subjectivity as well and become the object of the other's desire; therefore, they try to fill in this lack by turning to mysticism where they attain subjectivity. Thus, as depicted in the texts, Rabi'a and Margery's motivation for their devotion to God might reflect this Lacanian psychological and emotional need for liberation (and lack thereof) from their trauma.

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