

# Reviews

**Subjectivity in ‘Aṭṭār: Persian Sufism, and European Mysticism**, Claudia Yaghoobi, West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2017, ISBN 978-1-5575-3783-6 (paperback), 202 pp.

Claudia Yaghoobi’s new book, *Subjectivity in ‘Aṭṭār: Persian Sufism, and European Mysticism*, explores the construction of subjectivity in ‘Aṭṭār’s work with appropriate comparisons made with similar European texts. As we read through the chapters of this book, subjectivity refers to the ways in which individuals interact with the structures of their societies. Individuals adapt to or transgress cultural limits, resulting in a multitude of subjectivities, some considered desirable or hegemonic, and others marginal or alternative. The book makes it clear that subjectivities are products and producers of cultural limits and possibilities. In short, subjectivity is about ways of being. More importantly in a mystical context, subjectivity is about “ways of loving,” as the author aptly points out (p. 1). Employing modern theories of subjectivity, especially Michel Foucault’s theoretical framework, and drawing parallels with medieval European mystical texts, gives this book a unique place beyond the conventional boundaries that separate modern from medieval, or Europe from the Muslim world. Yaghoobi builds bridges where previously rigid walls, guarded by scholars entrenched in their respective epistemological camps, existed. She traverses the literary landscape of medieval European and Persian Sufi literature with ease while demonstrating how the use

of modern theories can deepen our knowledge of premodern subjects. The scope of this original study includes a comparative reading of these two genres of literature. However, the significance of it has important implications for historians, sociologists, and theorists of postmodernity. The author characterizes her project as “cross-cultural and cross-historical” (p. 5). But this book also upsets the civilizational discourse that assumes an irredeemable divide between East and West, Europe and its Muslim other.

This book is an exploration of the interaction of ‘Aṭṭār’s poetry with its Persian context. It also initiates a conversation with parallel medieval European literature and modern Western theoretical perspectives. Its main focus is on the ways in which they produce alternative inclusive subjectivities through what the author argues are their transgressive projects. As Yaghoobi states, to understand the aim of this book requires a “vision in which literature and theory, medieval and modern, Western and Middle Eastern cultures are viewed simultaneously” (pp. 2-3). Yaghoobi is also cognizant of the pitfalls of such a cross-cultural, cross-historical project, which she explains in the introduction. Her commendable knowledge of various genres and theoretical works in addition to mystical concepts make the introduction a useful read.

The book has six chapters. Chapter 1, “Sufism, ‘Aṭṭār, and His Works,” is a historical examination of ‘Aṭṭār’s sociopolitical context and Quranic and prophetic roots of Sufism, as well as its interaction with Christian mysticism. There is also a good discussion of the development of the concept of love, both profane and sublime, in this section. Chapter 2, “Modern Theory, Michel Foucault, and His Predecessors,” traces the genealogy of the concept of transgression and subjectivity in literary theory. This is an excellent exposition of the theoretical landscape against which this book posits itself. The works of Nietzsche, Sade, Lacan, and Bataille are explained, and snippets of other important thinkers like Butler and Irigaray are spread throughout the book. Explanations of theories in this chapter should prove helpful not only for grasping the intended goals of this book, but also for learning the theories noted. The focus, however, is on Foucault’s work to demonstrate the ways in which the subjects of analysis in this book break the taboos and transcend barriers in order to emerge as new selves. There is a useful explanation of similarities and differences between ‘Aṭṭār and Foucault in regard to their concerns with transgression and reconstruction of subjectivity at the end of this chapter.

The book then enters into specific case studies with a parallel reading of ‘Aṭṭār’s representation of Rābī’a al-‘Adawiyya and her Christian counterpart Margery Kempe in chapter 3. Rābī’a is presented as a woman who achieved “liberation” by transgressing the limits of the gendered sexual boundaries imposed on her. These female mystics turned to divine love and union with the divine in order to construct new identities. In the process, Yaghoobi argues, they earned the male mystics’ acceptance of their gender transgression and gender equality. Chapter 4, entitled “Mahmud and Ayāz, Sufi Homoeroticism, and European Same-sex Relationships,” draws similar parallels by discussing the violation of sexual boundaries of the time by Sultan Mahmud and his Turkish slave, Ayāz. Their relationship is discussed with reference to the Sufi practice of *shāhidbāzi* (“gazing at beardless adolescent boys”). This chapter argues that Sultan Mahmud broke with the common conventions of this prac-

tice by not practicing their same-sex love in a mystical context or merely for the love of God. The author argues that ‘Aṭṭār’s description of this love is unusual in that the object of love is an adult man not the expected adolescent boy. The love between these two men violates the mystical codes of this practice as well as the sexual and class boundaries of their day. By putting ‘Aṭṭār’s work in conversation with modern theories of subjectivity Yaghoobi convincingly argues that sexual transgression, the violation of codes and conventions, and the construction of subjectivity are common concerns of both medieval and modern subjects. The most important contribution of this chapter is the author’s demonstration of ‘Aṭṭār’s relevance (and by extension pre-modern Sufi concepts such as love, beloved, madness, wine, transgression) to our modern concerns with subjectivity. This discussion is nuanced by reference to similar same-sex love among high ranking clerics in medieval Europe. She concludes that whether in the medieval or modern context, the transgression of laws can lead to transcending arbitrarily constructed models of subjectivity.

A parallel reading of Majnun and Laila, and Lancelot and Guinevere is the subject of chapter 5. Here too ‘Aṭṭār’s depiction of Majnun’s love madness provides the context to discuss his violation of social norms and consequent marginalization. The chapter provides a good background to the variant narratives of the story of Majnun and Laila in Arabic and Persian literature. Majnun’s excessive love and erratic behavior brought shame and dishonor to Laila and her family and disturbed the arranged marriage practices. It also challenged the right of fathers as the arbiters of their offspring’s marriage. Yaghoobi argues that the condemnation of love madness by some Muslim scholars overlooks the transformative power of love that can bring about alternative ways of being and loving. More importantly, for ‘Aṭṭār Majnun’s subversive love madness is a model for transgressing the earthly limits of subjectivity, reconstructing alternative subjectivities, and ultimately the union with the divine. As in previous chapters, this chapter too is augmented by a close reading of selected medieval European literature, this time the tale of courtly love between Lancelot and Guinevere. Here the reader will find interesting and novel subversive commonalities between the adulterous love of these two European lovers and their Perso-Muslim counterparts.

“Shaykh San‘ān and the Christian Girl, and Abelard and Heloise” is the title of the final chapter (chapter 6). Shaykh San‘ān’s story of openly committing religious transgressions for the love of a Christian girl (and Abelard and Heloise’s engaging in pre-marital sex) provides Yaghoobi with a good example of how pushing back against religious or social norms and taboos causes transformation of subjectivity—i.e. brings about new ways of perceiving the self and cultural norms. The shaykh’s identity (subjectivity) is expectedly established according to the principles and limits of Islamic religious laws. He is the leader of a large community of believers because of his superior knowledge and devoted practice of Islam. Yet his transformative love for the Christian girl makes him blatantly violate Islamic religious laws, shocking his faithful followers. At the behest of the Christian girl and to prove his devotion to her he drinks wine and burns the Qur’an. However, his transgressions occasion the emergence of a new understanding of these laws and devotional practices. Yaghoobi maintains that by depicting

these transgressions ‘Aṭṭār intends to show that religious taboos hinder one’s spiritual growth. In addition to spiritual benefits of transgression, here she examines these cultural, religious, and sexual repressions and their effects on the way individuals position themselves in modern and medieval Middle Eastern societies through the prism of Foucault’s theoretical framework to good effect.

The concluding chapter focuses on individual marginalized characters (previous chapters were focused on couples in love, like Mahmud and Ayāz or Majnun and Leila). By discussing anecdotes about ‘Aṭṭār’s outcasts, gamblers, homosexuals, infidels, sinners, and fools, the chapter makes a case for ‘Aṭṭār’s intention to open up space in larger society for these “transgressors.” Yaghoobi argues that by integrating these marginalized elements into his poetry, ‘Aṭṭār challenges the literary and cultural boundaries that are established by excluding them. In effect ‘Aṭṭār is envisioning spiritual possibilities that are offered by these marginalized identities (subjectivities).

To repeat, it is refreshing to see a monograph like this which moves with ease between different historical periods, literary genres, vernaculars, and continents. The chapters are well thought out and passages from Persian and European sources are easy to follow. Also a number of selected original Persian texts provide good additions. Theoretical, literary, and mystical jargon is kept to a minimum. Some might take issue with this. A Foucauldian theorist, for example, might insist that a monograph engaging with Foucault and subjectivity must make extensive use of Foucault’s notion of “subjectivation” as well. However, minimizing the specialized terms and concepts make this book accessible for specialists of differing camps and even more so for non-specialists. The theories are explained well, arguments are well laid out. The conclusions are logical and plausible. It can further be noted that a greater consideration of other plausible conclusions could have added a richer texture to the book. For example, the inclusion of a great female saint like Rābi‘a shows ‘Aṭṭār’s willingness to push the boundaries of the established gendered discourse, as the book argues. But Rābi‘a is transformed into and is accepted as an “honorary man,” which perpetuates Sufism’s gender hierarchy. One can argue that her uniqueness and exceptional status ensures that very few women could ever become like her. The tale of Shaykh San‘ān is, as we read in chapter 6, an example of profane love leading to the possibility of union with the divine. It is also plausible that the shaykh’s earthly love for a Christian girl and outrageous transgressions of Islamic law—drinking wine, burning the Qur’an, tending the herd of swine—are an instrumental preamble to make his conversion back to Islam a momentous event. Perhaps these transgressions were not meant to produce a new subjective self, but to restore the old one in greater glory and in the process reaffirm the status quo.

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