




ARTICLE

## Jinn and Jins: Sensuous Piety as Queer Ethics

Hoda El Shakry 

The University of Chicago, IL  
Email: [helshakry@uchicago.edu](mailto:helshakry@uchicago.edu)

### Abstract

This article explores the speculative short stories of Egyptian writers Alifa Rifaat (Alifah Rifa‘at, 1930–1996) and Mansoura Ez-Eldin (Mansūrah ‘Izz al-Dīn, b. 1976) in conversation with scholarship from the anthropology of Islam, Islamic feminism, and queer theory. Rifaat’s 1974 “‘Ālamī al-Majhūl” (“My World of the Unknown”) and Ez-Eldin’s 2010 “Jinniyyāt al-Nīl” (“Faeries of the Nile”) both stage queer encounters between women and jinn (sentient spirit-beings within Islamic cosmology) who provide spiritual actualization as well as sexual fulfillment. I argue that their emphasis on sensuous forms of piety—largely through Sufi mystical philosophy and poetic imagery—models a queer ethics of being and knowing. Addressing the polarized critical receptions of Rifaat and Ez-Eldin among both the Arabic literary establishment and Anglophone reading publics, the article further exposes the secular sensibilities of the “world republic of letters,” in which feminist and queer modes of reading are often uncoupled from spiritual, and particularly Muslim, epistemes.

**Keywords:** speculative fiction; world literature; queer theory; secularism; Islam; Arabic literature; gender and sexuality; mysticism; Sufism; magical realism; embodiment

If this were a story by an American, or by an Arab woman to whom literature in English was generally familiar, one could fairly confidently read it as making some kind of positive statement about sexual love between women, or at least as playing with the idea of the impossibility of men fulfilling women’s erotic fantasies. However, given the author and her cultural background, *is that in fact how it should be read?*<sup>1</sup>

Asking whether Egyptian writer Alifa Rifaat’s (Alifah Rifa‘at, 1930–1996) religious upbringing forecloses certain interpretations of her fiction, Leila

---

<sup>1</sup> Leila Ahmed, “Arab Culture and Writing Women’s Bodies,” *Feminist Issues* 9 (1989): 41–55, 43; emphasis added.

Ahmed invites us to critically reflect on the relationship among literary reading practices, spiritual epistemes, and speculative world-building. Comparing Rifaat to the celebrated Egyptian activist, writer, and feminist par excellence, Nawal El Saadawi (1931–2021), Ahmed writes that Rifaat led “a conventional, unwesternized life, and has had little exposure to Western literature and apparently subscribes to the traditional beliefs of her society; she is a practicing Muslim who wears the veil.”<sup>2</sup> Nadjé Sadig Al-Ali, who extensively interviewed Rifaat, similarly describes the author as being “very strongly embedded within the frame of traditional Islamic culture,” adding that her fiction is imbued with “allusions to Islam as a cultural setting and a way of life.”<sup>3</sup> Rifaat’s donning of the veil as a signifier of “traditional” Islam, in particular, frequently registers as incompatible with the sexually explicit nature and queer overtones of her fiction.

Scholars of Alifa Rifaat’s work consistently struggle to disentangle the author from her writing—at once fascinated and unsettled by her personal faith practice and its implications for her literary persona. Suggesting that Rifaat instrumentalizes public expressions of piety in order to attenuate the prominence of sex/uality in her fiction, Al-Ali writes that:

Her ‘voice,’ unlike her writing, is mainly concerned with the construction of a self-image that is closely bound to Islam. Recently, the author even took up the veil to reinforce her religious conviction. She constantly refers to the Quran and Hadith to support any idea or argument she brings forth ... One cannot help the feeling that Alifa Rifaat uses religion to justify her writing and to protect her reputation. Her religious conviction seems to grow when speaking about sex ... In this context, there arises a noticeable difference between the stated intention of the author in regard to her writing and an independent interpretation of the texts.<sup>4</sup>

Relying upon false binaries of the sacred/secular and spiritual/sensuous, Rifaat’s reception exposes the ideological fault lines within the critical interpellation of Muslim women’s cultural production.

Alifa Rifaat’s literary and personal life received renewed attention following the series of regional uprisings beginning in 2011 popularly dubbed “the Arab spring.” In her controversial 2012 Foreign Policy article “Why Do They Hate Us? The Real War on Women Is in the Middle East,” Mona Eltahawy—an Egyptian American journalist, media commentator, and “disruptor of patriarchy”—mobilizes Rifaat’s short story “Distant View of a Minaret” to critique gender politics in contemporary Egypt.<sup>5</sup> The story tells of a woman in a sexually unfulfilling marriage who finds

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed, “Arab Culture and Writing Women’s Bodies,” 42.

<sup>3</sup> Nadjé Sadig Al-Ali, *Gender Writing/Writing Gender: The Representation of Women in a Selection of Modern Egyptian Literature* (Cairo, Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press, 1994), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Ali, *Gender Writing/Writing Gender*, 49–50.

<sup>5</sup> Rahila Gupta, “Mona Eltahawy and sexual revolution in the Middle East,” *Open Democracy*, January 19, 2016 (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/mona-eltahawy-and-sexual-revolution-in-middle-east/>).

spiritual gratification in the sensuousness of prayer.<sup>6</sup> Eltahawy diagnostically reads the story's "trifecta of sex, death, and religion" as an attack on "misogyny in the Middle East."<sup>7</sup> Her analysis of the narrator's/author's "sublimation through religion" projects a *causal* relationship onto Rifaat's story, in which sexual dissatisfaction is sublimated into prayer.<sup>8</sup> In so doing, Eltahawy implies that spirituality is merely a poor substitute for authentic—meaning "secular"—forms of bodily gratification. What if, however, the story models a more capacious understanding of sensuous desire and pleasure? Rifaat explains that "When I pray, I feel I'm sitting with my lover," adding that "prayer is better than sleep."<sup>9</sup> Her comments highlight the profound sensuous intimacy of prayer, as well as its necessity to both somatic and ethical life. This is not to diminish the ways in which men frequently figure in Rifaat's short stories as gatekeepers to women's spiritual and sexual fulfillment. Rather, it is to suggest that the protagonist's cultivation of a richly sensuous pious praxis models forms of physical pleasure that do not rely upon heteropatriarchal social or sexual relations.

In the ensuing debates between Mona Eltahawy and Leila Ahmed, Rifaat's stories are read through somewhat conflicting accounts of her life and personal faith practice. Eltahawy, for example, comments, "I interviewed her extensively and she told me ... what she was doing through these short stories... ." <sup>10</sup> Leila Ahmed similarly notes her firsthand knowledge of Rifaat's beliefs, commenting:

Rifaat, when I met her in Cairo in the early 1990s, wore the *hijab*, the Muslim head scarf. And she explicitly spoke to me—in the course of a long, rambling conversation in which she also talked of the tremendous importance to her of sexuality—of how much joy she found in prayer, and of how she (like the character in her story) almost lived for those moments of prayer.<sup>11</sup>

The collapsing of biographical accounts with literary analysis once again centers on the seeming incommensurability of spirituality and sex. Moreover, there is an overriding tendency across figures as diverse as Leila Ahmed, Nadje Sadig Al-Ali, and Mona Eltahawy to situate their readings within the anecdotal authority of Rifaat's personal life.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The story ends with the narrator peacefully drinking the coffee she had prepared for her husband as his corpse lies in their bed.

<sup>7</sup> Mona Eltahawy, "Why Do They Hate Us? The Real War on Women is in the Middle East," *Foreign Policy*, April 23, 2012 (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/04/23/why-do-they-hate-us/>).

<sup>8</sup> Eltahawy, "Why Do They Hate Us?"

<sup>9</sup> In the same interview, Rifaat confesses that she "never felt that a man could really satisfy her"; Patrick Martin, "The Globe Abroad: Patrick Martin in the Middle East, Second of Three Parts," *The Globe and Mail*, December 5, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Mona Eltahawy, "Misogyny in the Muslim World," *MSNBC: Melissa Harris-Perry Show*, April 28, 2012 (<https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna47345830>).

<sup>11</sup> Leila Ahmed, "Debating the War on Women," *Foreign Policy*, April 24, 2012 (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/04/24/debating-the-war-on-women/>).

<sup>12</sup> Liberatory tropes abound in articles on the author. See J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, "The Lifted Veil: Protest in Alifa Rifaat's Short Stories," *International Fiction Review* 17.2 (1990); and Nayera El Mianiwi, "Religion and Feminism in the Short Story of Alifa Rifaat—The Voice of the 'Voiceless,'"

This critical landscape reveals a series of taxonomical assumptions about Islam, in which certain expressions of piety—such as veiling or engagement with the Muslim textual corpus through quotidian citational practices—are circumscribed within a normative framework of “traditional” Islam. When the queer inflections of Rifaat’s fiction are exclusively read through a liberatory feminist lens, there is perceived dissimulation between her literary “heterodoxy” and performative “orthodoxy.” The seminal work of anthropologist Saba Mahmood is instructive for navigating this seeming tension between orthodoxy/heterodoxy and inward spirituality/outward comportment.<sup>13</sup> Her project centers agentival expressions of Muslim piety that inhabit rather than resist norms in ways that speak to some of the scholarly discomfort with Rifaat. When we approach Islam as a multivalent set of beliefs and behaviors, the diversity of Muslim spiritual practices reflects ethical imperatives, critical modes, and subjectivities that do not neatly fit within singular emancipatory political projects. This article attenuates the critical overemphasis on representational incongruity by attending to how Rifaat’s fiction interweaves Qur’anic textual conventions with Sufi mystical philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

In what follows, I put Alifa Rifaat into conversation with Egyptian writer Mansoura Ez-Eldin (Mansūrah ‘Izz al-Dīn, b. 1976), whose writing readily circulates within the secularized economy of world literature. Although both authors tackle the complex relationship between gender-sexuality and piety, they have wildly different receptions among Anglophone critics. The pairing of Rifaat and Ez-Eldin thus exposes some of the conceptual limitations of the so-called “world republic of letters,” in which feminist and queer modes of reading are often uncoupled from spiritual, and particularly Muslim, epistemes.<sup>15</sup> Rifaat’s 1974 “‘Ālamī al-Majhūl” (“My World of the Unknown”) and Ez-Eldin’s 2010 “Jinniyyāt al-Nīl” (“Faeries of the Nile”) both stage queer encounters between women and jinn—sentient spirit-beings within Islamic cosmology—who provide spiritual as

---

*Journal of Literature and Art Studies* 3.7 (2013): 402–14. For an overview of psychoanalytic interpretations of Rifaat’s writing, see Dīya M. Abdo, “My Qarina, My Self: The Homoerotic as Islamic Feminism in Alifa Rifaat’s ‘My World of the Unknown,’” *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 16 (2012): 398–415, 400. As an exception to this critical corpus, Abdo argues that Rifaat “elaborate[s] a radical Islamic feminism where womanhood becomes the perfect representation of god’s love and beauty” through the figure of her jinn double or “Qarina” (401). She borrows Leila Ahmed’s model of “ethical Islam” rooted in popular, Sufi, and “women’s Islam,” which opposes masculinist, textualist, or orthodox interpretations aligned with the religious elite (403). As I will elaborate, my own use of ethics relies upon a conceptualization of the relationship between ethical comportment and embodiment that bridges Islamic feminism, the anthropology of Piety, and queer studies.

<sup>13</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Sufism, or *ṭaṣawwuf*, in this article, indexes a diverse number of beliefs, practices, and teachings within Islam that generally center on a spiritual path—usually under the guidance of a teacher—oriented toward communion with the divine creator. See Sa’diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ‘Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 35.

<sup>15</sup> Pascale Casanova’s theory of the world republic of letters has come under criticism for its privileging of both Euro-American genres of literary writing and (neo)colonial distribution circuits. Michael Allan offers an incisive critique of the promotion of secular reading practices within Arabic literary studies. See Michael Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature: Sites of Reading in Colonial Egypt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

well as sexual nourishment. I argue that their emphasis on sensuous forms of piety, largely through Sufi conceptual language and imagery, models a queer ethics of being and knowing.

## Desecularizing Literary Hermeneutics

To a certain extent, Rifaat's and Ez-Eldin's divergent receptions can be attributed to their differing class backgrounds and relationships to literary establishments both within Egypt and abroad. As most critics have dwelled upon, Alifa (born Fatima) Rifaat had only primary schooling coupled with "extensive education in the teachings of Islam."<sup>16</sup> Forbidden by her husband to pursue a writing career, Rifaat published clandestinely under various pen names.<sup>17</sup> Upon discovering this, he threatened to divorce her and even resorted to having her swear upon the Qur'an that she would stop writing.<sup>18</sup>

Critics further tend to fetishize the subversiveness of Rifaat's fiction in light of her seeming provinciality. Because she was monolingual and never left Egypt, Rifaat is seen as lacking literacy in the universalized Euro-American feminism that scholars presume is needed to confront gendered norms—here particularized as "Muslim patriarchy." Rifaat's literary success following the death of her husband is often credited to the patronage of Denys Johnson-Davies, a British translator and literary critic.<sup>19</sup> Johnson-Davies curated and translated Rifaat's short stories for the 1983 volume titled after her popular story *Distant View of the Minaret*. His introduction to the collection begins with the assertion that "more convincingly than any other woman writing in Arabic today, Alifa Rifaat, an Egyptian in her early fifties, lifts the veil on what it means to be a woman living within a traditional Muslim society."<sup>20</sup> Johnson-Davies goes on to paint a picture of a woman who wrote compelling realist fiction despite the "limitations" of not having a university education or fluency in any foreign languages, never having left Egypt, and being yoked to the "traditional" expectations of her family and husband.<sup>21</sup> He emphasizes how Rifaat's literary "revolt" is "radically different from any postured by Western Women's lib" because it is grounded within "a strictly religious, even orthodox, framework"—going so far as to make speculative claims about her personal interpretation of Qur'anic precepts.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Al-Ali, *Gender Writing/Writing Gender*, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Rifaat's first marriage was dissolved within months. According to the author, she refused to sleep with her first husband but "he did rape me with his finger one time"; Martin, "The Globe Abroad."

<sup>18</sup> Al-Ali, *Gender Writing/Writing Gender*, 45–46.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Ali, *Gender Writing/Writing Gender*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Denys Johnson-Davies, "Introduction," *Distant View of the Minaret* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1983), vii.

<sup>21</sup> Johnson-Davies, "Introduction," vii.

<sup>22</sup> Johnson-Davies writes: "While Alifa Rifaat would of course not disagree with the Qur'anic precept 'men are in charge of women,' she would appear to take the view that this automatically places upon men the burden of behaving towards women with kindness and generosity—as is enjoined by the Qur'an. If a man's behaviour falls short of what is expected of him, the woman's natural acceptance of her role is likely to change to contempt and rebellion. Alifa Rifaat's revolt,

Johnson-Davies's remarks reveal another register of Rifaat's literary persona—namely, as a native informant who accrues legibility within, but nonetheless remains an outsider to, the world literary marketplace through her circulation in English translation.

Contrastingly, Mansoura Ez-Eldin more easily passes as a writer of world literature. Citing Italo Calvino, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Franz Kafka, Edgar Allan Poe, Bruno Schulz, Carlos Fuentes, and Roberto Bolaño as influences, her writing lends itself to the genre fiction label of magical realism.<sup>23</sup> Unlike Rifaat, who was “shunned by ... most of Egypt's progressive writers and intellectuals,” Ez-Eldin has garnered significant critical recognition from the Arabic literary establishment.<sup>24</sup> English translations of her work also frequently appear on popular literary websites and in world literature anthologies.<sup>25</sup>

This kind of global visibility and circulation, however, generates its own detractors, as Ez-Eldin's writing has been criticized as dated or derivative. In response to her inclusion in *The Granta Book of the African Short Story*, a reviewer for the Guardian wrote that “Mansoura Ez-Eldin is the second youngest writer here, but ‘Faeries of the Nile,’ using the conceit of imaginary river faeries to express repressed sexuality, seems incredibly dated.”<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, the reviewer for *ThinkAfricaPress* commented:

The collection does contain some weaker stories which show a little too strongly the influence of past generations and styles, notably Mansoura Ez-Eldin's contribution. Her *Faeries of the Nile* is a story in the tradition of tiresome magical realism about the hardships of village life on the Nile Delta.<sup>27</sup>

Exposing the double-edged sword that is the world republic of letters, the charge of belated modernity is a fait accompli when critics insist on measuring Ez-Eldin's fiction against the yardstick of Euro-American literary taxonomies.

---

therefore, is merely against certain man-made interpretations and accretions that have grown up over the years and remain unquestioned by the majority of both men and women.” Johnson-Davies, “Introduction,” viii.

<sup>23</sup> Mansoura Ez-Eldin, “Carrying the Mantle of Edgar Allan Poe in Egypt,” *Arablit*, interview by Ahmed Salah Eldein, December 19, 2016 (<https://arablit.org/2016/12/19/mansoura-ez-eldin-carrying/>).

<sup>24</sup> Martin, “The Globe Abroad.” Ez-Eldin was selected for Beirut39 in 2009 as one of the best Arab writers younger than 40; she participated in the inaugural *nadwa* writers workshop convened by the International Prize for Fiction in Abu Dhabi; *Beyond Paradise* was short-listed for the 2010 International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF); and *Emerald Mountain* won the 2014 Best Novel Award at the Sharjah International Book Fair.

<sup>25</sup> Ez-Eldin's work has appeared on the websites Granta, Banipal, and Arablit Quarterly, as well as in *The Granta Book of the African Short Story*, *One World Two: A Second Global Anthology of Short Stories*, and *The Uncanny Reader: Stories from the Shadows*.

<sup>26</sup> Bernardine Evaristo, “A Landmark Collection That Celebrates a Strong Decade of African Writing,” *Guardian*, November 10, 2011 (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/nov/10/granta-african-short-story-review>).

<sup>27</sup> Tom Begg, “Review: The Granta Book of The African Short Story,” *ThinkAfricaPress*, September 6, 2011 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20111026101825/http://thinkafricapress.com/culture/review-granta-book-african-short-story>).

The dismissal of her writing as “tiresome magical realism” further sheds light on the fetishization of magical realism as the privileged genre of literature from the global south.<sup>28</sup> Whitewashing cosmological and spiritual lifeworlds, genre fiction labels such as magical realism expose the illegibility of certain ethical epistemes within the dominant paradigms of secularized literary criticism.

Although Ez-Eldin embraces the language of the uncanny and gothic in English-language interviews, she also describes her investment in the richness of Muslim knowledge practices and imaginaries. From her first novella, *Matāhat Maryam* (*Maryam’s Maze*), through her subsequent short stories and novellas, Ez-Eldin’s writing explores mystical, otherworldly, and mythological dreamscapes.<sup>29</sup> *Matāhat Maryam*, for example, borrows from the figure of the *qarīn*, or double, within Islamic cosmology. The *qarīn*—from the root قرن signifying to couple, connect, or pair—is a spirit double within the realm of jinn. Ez-Eldin explains:

The novel was inspired by the Muslim notion of the “double” or the Pharaonic “ka/ba” concept of being. In Islamic culture, the “double” is known as “Al Qarin” or “the spirit companion.” There’s a strong belief that everyone has a double, or Qarin, who is invisible. ... Let’s say that the metaphysical sides of religions—and the rich oral Islamic and Egyptian heritage—are a main source of inspiration to me.<sup>30</sup>

Islamic cosmology and Egyptian mythology offer a rich spiritual and aesthetic repository for both Mansoura Ez-Eldin’s and Alifa Rifaat’s speculative world-building. Reading these writers paratactically brings into relief the complex ways in which they mobilize the figure of the jinn in order to stage queer modes of critique. Queerness here signals both same-sex desire and counter-hegemonic articulations of gender-sexuality that upend heteropatriarchal

<sup>28</sup> Scholars of Latin American and sub-Saharan African literature have long problematized magical realism’s fetishization as “a global postcolonial literary project” that at once indexes and essentializes alterity through a false binary of the mystical, magical, and primitive against the modern, rational, and mimetic; Lydie Moudileno, “Magical Realism: Arme miracleuse for the African Novel?” *Research in African Literatures* 37.1: 28–41, esp. 30. See also Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, “Marvelous Autocrats: Disrupted Realisms in the Dictator-Novel of the South Atlantic,” *The Global South Atlantic: Region, Vision, Method*, ed. Joseph R. Slaughter and Kerry Bystrom (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 186–204; Liam Connell, “Discarding Magic Realism: Modernism, Anthropology, and Critical Practice,” *ARIEL* 29.2 (1998): 95–110; Sylvia Molloy, “Latin America in the US Imaginary: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the Magical Realist Imperative,” *Nation, Language and the Ethics of Translation*, ed. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 370–79; and Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 2001). From Molloy’s “magical realist imperative” to Huggan’s “postcolonial exotic,” these scholars challenge how the generic codification of magical realism effaces its development as an aesthetic mode deeply tied to specific cultural, cosmological, and geopolitical contexts.

<sup>29</sup> Ez-Eldin’s novel *Emerald Mountain*, for example, turns to the story of Jabal Qaf—a mythological mountain that appears in popular Arabic and Persian writings. In Sufi literature the mountain is less a physical monument than a stage of spiritually elevated consciousness.

<sup>30</sup> Mansoura Ez-Eldin, *The Rumpus*, interview by Pauls Toutonghi, July 12, 2011 (<https://therumpus.net/2011/07/the-rumpus-interview-with-mansoura-ez-eldin/>).

libidinal and social relations. This article builds upon queer theory's disruption of compulsory normative gender identities and sexual practices, by attending to the multiple registers of queerness invoked by jinn. These sentient spirit-beings exceed human conceptions of the body and attendant gendering and sexing practices. As shapeshifters that can move among human, animal, and nonmaterial forms, jinn corporeality is inherently ephemeral. I read their explicit gendering as "female" in Ez-Eldin's and Rifaat's stories as a gender-queering act that further calls into question the ontological stability of gender-sexuality.

### Invisible Cosmologies

Before turning to Rifaat and Ez-Eldin's stories, I will contextualize their mobilization of the figure of the jinn within the broader body of religious and popular literature on these elusive creatures. The plural noun *jinn* denotes a genus of sentient beings cited in works from the pre-Islamic period and in the Qur'an. Etymologically the term:

Is derived from the verb *janna*, "he was [or "became"] concealed" or "veiled from sight"; thus, the veiling darkness of night is called *jinn* (Jawharī). According to Arab philologists, the term *jinn* signifies, primarily, "beings that are concealed from [man's] senses" (*Qāmūs, Lisān al- 'Arab, Rāghib*), and is thus applicable to all kinds of invisible beings or forces.<sup>31</sup>

Alongside their imperceptibility, the Qur'an emphasizes the noncorporeality of jinn through "parabolic" references to their creation from fire.<sup>32</sup> Some exegetes such as Muhammad Asad suggest that jinn may serve a largely symbolic function in the Qur'an—occasionally representing ethnolinguistic or religious outsiders, or even serving as an ideational bridge to pre-Islamic beliefs. Other scholars align them with the "doctrinal ambiguity" surrounding sorcery (*siḥr*) and the occult sciences.<sup>33</sup> Outright denial of the existence of jinn is problematic because of their explicit presence in the Qur'an and association with the unseen elements of divine revelation; put otherwise, "trusting belief in one unseen (revelation) leads to attestation of the existence of another (jinn)."<sup>34</sup>

In her extensive study on jinn, Amira El Zein refers to them as "intermediary" beings that serve a critical function within descriptions of Islamic cosmology across the Qur'an and hadith, as well as in works of exegesis and speculative theology.<sup>35</sup> They are part of a cosmological order consisting of a hierarchy of

<sup>31</sup> Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, trans. with commentary by Muhammad Asad (Bristol: Book Foundation. 2003), 214n86.

<sup>32</sup> Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 1135. See Qur'an 7:12, 15:27, 38:76, 55:14–15.

<sup>33</sup> Alireza Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2018), 63.

<sup>34</sup> Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals*, 54.

<sup>35</sup> Hadith literature refers to the sayings and practices ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad (hereafter referred to as the Prophet) that were largely compiled in the eighth and ninth centuries.



realms, or worlds, each bearing their own properties and beings: terrestrial or material (clay/human), intermediate or imaginal (fire/jinn), celestial (light/angels), and divine.<sup>36</sup> The Qur'an also speaks of seven earths that resemble the seven heavens.<sup>37</sup> As beings who travel between worlds, jinn call attention to the significance of world-building and terraforming to both Qur'anic creationism and divine ipseity.<sup>38</sup>

This multiverse reflects a broader metaphysical and epistemological dialectic within Islam between the exoteric (*zāhir*), or world of the visible (*'ālam al-shahādah*), and the esoteric (*bāṭin*), or world of the invisible (*'ālam l-ghayb*). Following the philosophers Henry Corbin and Ibn 'Arabī, El Zein associates the invisible—and by extension, jinn—with the imaginal realm.<sup>39</sup> The Qur'an frequently refers to the multiplicity of worlds over which God reigns as “the Sustainer of all the worlds’ (*rabb al-‘ālamīn*),” which notably includes “the realm which is beyond the reach of human perception (*al-ghayb*).”<sup>40</sup> Moreover, “The Qur'an endorses firm belief in the unseen (*al-ghayb*)” in the sura *al-Baqarah* (“The Cow”), which reads:<sup>41</sup>

THIS DIVINE WRIT—let there be no doubt about it—is [meant to be] a guidance for all the God-conscious (2) who believe in [the existence of] that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and are constant in prayer, and spend on others out of what We provide for them as sustenance (3).<sup>42</sup>

The dialectic between the exoteric/visible and the esoteric/invisible is central not only to Islamic cosmology and the divine attributes—*al-bāṭin* and *al-zāhir* being among *al-asmā' al-ḥusnā* or God's ninety-nine holy names—but also to the

---

Amira El Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 6.

<sup>36</sup> According to Qur'anic cosmogony, while humans appeared after jinn and are the furthest from the divine, they are superior to jinn insofar as prophets only come from humans and humans alone are “God's viceregents on Earth”; El Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*, 26. Similarly, the Qur'an is explicit that jinn are not in themselves divine, nor do they share any special kinship with God; see Qur'an 6:100, 34:41, 37:158.

<sup>37</sup> See Qur'an 65:12. This is expanded upon in the prophetic tradition and by canonical exegetes such as al-Bukhārī (d. 870), cited in a number of medieval texts, and referred to in philosophical literature by mystics such as Ibn 'Arabī. See El Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*, 17–18.

<sup>38</sup> El Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*, 4. See Qur'an 8:16, 55:29.

<sup>39</sup> El Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*, 19. For Corbin, the imaginal, or *mundus imaginis*, is “a suprasensory world, insofar as it is not perceptible except by the imaginative perception, and insofar as the events that occur in it cannot be experienced except by the imaginative or imaginant consciousness”; Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn 'Arabī*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 18. The Islamic theologian and polymath Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111) bridges the concepts of imagination, poesis, and the threshold (*dihlīz*); see Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of the Imagination*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>40</sup> Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 1135.

<sup>41</sup> Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals*, 53.

<sup>42</sup> Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 8.

practice of Qur'anic hermeneutics.<sup>43</sup> It recalls the Islamic concept of the *barzakh*, or isthmus, connoting an intermediate state separating two (material or immaterial) entities.<sup>44</sup> Because jinn are deeply intertwined with the ineffable, unknowable, imagination, dream-states, and the unconscious, they are a subject of interest among esoteric philosophers. Similarly, because of their ability to cross thresholds, “Stories of Sufis seeing jinn are abundant in Sufi literature and popular medieval culture.”<sup>45</sup>

As the Qur'an is addressed to both humans and jinn, they share the faculty of reason and moral capacity to perceive religious truths.<sup>46</sup> The sura *al-Aḥqāf* (“The Sand Dunes”), for example, tells of a gathering of jinn who listen to the Prophet recite the Qur'anic revelation, convert to Islam, and even help to spread the faith among their kind.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, the sura *al-Jinn* tells of Muslim jinn who shared the Qur'an's message and “wondrous discourse” with their fellow beings.<sup>48</sup> Like many of the instances of reported speech in the Qur'an, the two suras include speech acts of faith in which the jinn exalt God, affirm his divine unity, and praise his guidance to believers. *Al-Jinn* underscores the sentient nature of jinn by recounting how Muslim jinn have “surrendered themselves to God” by absorbing the Qur'anic message into their “consciousness.”<sup>49</sup>

Marriages, romances, and love affairs between humans and jinn appear in a range of pre-Islamic sources, as does the belief that jinn can share their knowledge with lovers.<sup>50</sup> Prohibitions against these unions were relatively common among early Muslim jurists, and allusions to such couplings, as well as their progeny, appear in the Qur'an (55:56, 55:74) and hadith literature.<sup>51</sup> Because religious and popular literature tends to assume heterosexual or nonsexed unions—as in the case of shapeshifting jinn who mate while in noncorporeal or animal form—I maintain that Rifaat and Ez-Eldin's explicit same-sex gendering articulates a distinctly queer ethics.

Although jinn boast a rich presence in pre-Islamic and Qur'anic literature, the concept of *jins*—connoting not only genus, species, or race, but also gender,

<sup>43</sup> *Ta'wīl*—esoteric hermeneutics, which relies upon allegorical or symbolic interpretation—is critical to Sufi poetics and praxis. See Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn 'Arabī*.

<sup>44</sup> Appearing in the Qur'an (23:99–100, 25:53, and 55:19–20), the concept of the *barzakh* is central to esoteric and Sufi philosophy by Ibn 'Arabī, among others. See Salman Bashier, *Ibn al-'Arabī's Barzakh: The Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004). On jinn and thresholds, see El Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*, 86.

<sup>45</sup> El Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*, 26.

<sup>46</sup> Both humans and jinn “will be accounted for their deeds on the Day of Judgement because they both have received the Revealed Law, and it is implicit they know it”; El Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*, 14. On the diversity of jinn and their beliefs, see Qur'an 72:14.

<sup>47</sup> Qur'an 46:29–32.

<sup>48</sup> Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 1026.

<sup>49</sup> Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 1026. The sura also includes an admonishment of jinn that refuse this path in favor of “wrongdoing” and therefore consign themselves to hellfire. See Qur'an 72:15.

<sup>50</sup> El Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*, 103–04.

<sup>51</sup> El Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*, 105–06.

sex, or sexuality—has a more vexed history.<sup>52</sup> The word *jins* is not indigenous to the Arabic language, but rather, was lexically absorbed as a transliteration of the Greek *genus* around the early nineteenth century.<sup>53</sup> Unlike other imported words into Arabic, however, it “morphologically resembles the basic Arabic trilateral root,” which “allows the word *jins* to ‘naturalize’ itself more easily than other imported words.”<sup>54</sup> This seamless linguistic assimilation has resulted in a proliferation of derivative compound words that help codify certain gender-sexuality taxonomies within Arabic, Persian, and Turkic languages.<sup>55</sup> As Afsaneh Najmabadi so expertly excavates, *jins* was initially a highly polysemic word applicable to a wide range of beings and objects. The term lost much of its semiotic capaciousness when it was inflected by European biomedical discourse at the turn of the century. Once it became more explicitly attached to notions of gendered and sexual difference, *jins* acquired a more disciplining function through which it reified normative sociocultural behaviors. As an adjectival form—*jinsī*, or sexual—comes to modify “organs, hormones, bodies” along a male-female binary; in a register akin to “gender” in English, “it modifies behavior, crimes, violence along a masculine-feminine axis. Finally, it occurs as modifier of desire, attraction, acts, relations, in what comes close to the English ‘sexuality.’”<sup>56</sup> If the stories of Rifaat and Ez-Eldin figure jinn as queering objects of desire, then they also disrupt “the consolidation of *jins-as-sex*” by exploring interspecies kinship bonds that bridge spiritual and sensuous pleasure.<sup>57</sup>

## Queer Times

Alifat Rifaat’s 1974 short story “‘Ālamī al-Majhūl” or, “My World of the Unknown,” recounts a woman’s spiritual and sexual awakening using Sufi poetic language and imagery. The unnamed narrator and her family relocate to the remote countryside of the Nile delta following the transfer of her civil servant husband. She feels inexplicably drawn to a dilapidated house that is fiercely guarded by an itinerant woman named Aneesa, who continues to wander the grounds after the family moves in.<sup>58</sup> As the police forcibly remove her, Aneesa utters the cryptic words “I’ll leave her to you,” and the narrator

<sup>52</sup> *Al-Mawrid: Arabic-English, English-Arabic Dictionary*, compiled by Munir Baalbaki and Dr. Rohi Baalbaki (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ilm li-l-Malāyīn, 2007), 435.

<sup>53</sup> Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Genus of Sex or the Sexing of *Jins*,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45.2 (2013): 211–31, esp. 226.

<sup>54</sup> Samia Mehrez, “Translating Gender,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 3.1 (2007): 106–27, esp. 109.

<sup>55</sup> See Mehrez, “Translating Gender,” 109; Najmabadi, “Genus of Sex or the Sexing of *Jins*,” 226; Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 32; and Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 159.

<sup>56</sup> Najmabadi, “Genus of Sex or the Sexing of *Jins*,” 213.

<sup>57</sup> Najmabadi, “Genus of Sex or the Sexing of *Jins*,” 220.

<sup>58</sup> Abdo argues that the protagonist is “called” to the house through a dream-vision; Abdo, “My Qarina, My Self,” 402.

soon encounters a snake flirtatiously writhing in the garden.<sup>59</sup> Bewitching the narrator, the female snake induces a sense of “terror” (*al-ruʿb*) alongside “a strange, magnetic euphoria” (*nashwah gharibah munjadhibah*) that “intoxicated” her soul.<sup>60</sup>

When the narrator consults a local Sufi Sheikh of the Rifāʿiyyah order—whose members are renowned for their miraculous powers, particularly with respect to snakes<sup>61</sup>—he proclaims the creature to be “one of the monarchs of the earth (*mulūk al-arḍ*) ... who has appeared to you in the image a snake (*fī ṣūrat afʿā*).”<sup>62</sup> Tapping the earth with a stick, the Sheikh incants Qurʿanic passages to bless the site from which the snake surfaced.<sup>63</sup> He explains that jinn have a long history in Islam dating back to the Prophet Muhammed, noting that “some of them are virtuous (*al-sāliḥūn*) and some of them are Muslims.”<sup>64</sup> The Sheikh tells the narrator that “other worlds known only to their Creator (*ʿawālim ukhrā lā ya lamuhā ghayr khāliqihā*)” have opened up to her because of her “purity of spirit (*naqāʾ nafsik*)” and “translucence of soul (*shaffāfiyyat ruḥik*).”<sup>65</sup> He advises her to recite the prayer “رب زدني علما” (“O Lord, increase me in knowledge”) from the Qurʿanic sura Ṭā Ha (20:114), adding rather elliptically that she should welcome the spirit, even into her own bed.<sup>66</sup>

The narrator becomes increasingly enamored of the snake who arouses “excitement,” “passionate love” (*ishq*), “curiosity,” and “yearning,” in addition to “intense fear.”<sup>67</sup> Wondering whether her feelings will be reciprocated, she speculates about how a physical “union” (*al-waṣl*) celebrating “the delights of the body” would come about between a woman and snake.<sup>68</sup> Awaiting her soon to be lover in “a state of continuous torment (*ʿadhāb muttaṣil*),” the narrator is consumed by “a strange feeling of longing (*shuʿūr gharīb bi-l-shawq*)” that “scorched” her body and “tore apart” her senses (*yaḥriq jasadī wa-yamziq ḥissī*).<sup>69</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Alifa Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” *Distant View of a Minaret and Other Stories*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987), 67.

<sup>60</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 68; Alifa Rifaat “Ālamī al-Majhūl,” *Man Yakūn al-Rajul* (Egypt: Maṭābʿ al-Hayʾah al-Miṣriyyah al-ʿAmmah li-l-Kitāb, 1981), 55; translation modified.

<sup>61</sup> See Indrani Mitra, “There Is No Sin in Our Love”: Homoerotic Desire in the Stories of Two Muslim Women Writers,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 29.2 (2010): 311–29, 323; and Valerie J. Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 99.

<sup>62</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 69; Rifaat, “Ālamī al-Majhūl,” 57; translation modified.

<sup>63</sup> Both the sheikh and narrator use the feminized term أفعى—connoting a “venomous snake” or “viper”—rather than the more common term for a snake in Egypt ثعبان.

<sup>64</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 69; Rifaat, “Ālamī al-Majhūl,” 57.

<sup>65</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 70; Rifaat, “Ālamī al-Majhūl,” 57.

<sup>66</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 70; Rifaat, “Ālamī al-Majhūl,” 57. Asad translates the sura as “O my Sustainer, cause me to grow in knowledge!”; Asad, *The Message of the Qurʿan*, 539.

<sup>67</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 70–71; Rifaat, “Ālamī al-Majhūl,” 59; translation modified. *ishq*, a passionate love for the divine beloved, is a common image in Arabic and Persian Sufi devotional literature and writing; see Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt*, 162; and Abdo, “My Qarina, My Self,” 410.

<sup>68</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 71; Rifaat, “Ālamī al-Majhūl,” 59.

<sup>69</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 71; Rifaat, “Ālamī al-Majhūl,” 59; translation modified.

Employing Sufi poetic language that hovers between the sensuous and the spiritual, Rifaat describes the narrator's desire along both affective and sensorial registers.

The snake next appears through a suggestive opening in her bedroom wall, at once crossing the threshold between worlds and disrupting the home's conjugal sanctity. Confessing her willingness to pursue this "mounting desire" even to the point of her own self-destruction, the narrator "lay back in submission (*istislām*)"—a term with spiritual overtones given its shared etymology with the word *Islam*.<sup>70</sup> The snake seduces her with offers of unparalleled "pleasure" and "bliss," promising to "prise out your pearl from its shell so that I may polish it and bring forth its splendor."<sup>71</sup> Inviting the narrator to revel in the delights of the flesh, the jinn notes that their shared world is sanctioned by God: "Only the eye of God alone will see us; He alone will know what we are about and He will watch over us."<sup>72</sup> Having confirmed the sacredness of their union, the narrator lets the snake caress her body with her fangs and insert her pronged "golden tongue, like an *arak* twig" between her thighs.<sup>73</sup> Given the importance of the *arak* tree to Islamic hygienical jurisprudence on purity and cleanliness, including reports of its use by the Prophet Muhammad, Rifaat subtly situates this act of cunnilingus within a spiritual episteme.

Rifaat describes the snake's penetration of the narrator's body in language brimming with erotic tension that culminates in "convulsions ... till my whole body tingled and started to shake in sharp, painful, rapturous spasms."<sup>74</sup> The encounter leaves the narrator entranced and intoxicated, but crucially awakens in her a joyful energy for life. Despite the impassioned intensity of their sexual union, the narrator is gripped by bouts of fear and doubt over their relationship. After their first tryst, she points out the hole in the bedroom wall to her husband so that he may plaster it shut. This moment of self-sabotage illustrates the narrator's interrelated drives of desire and terror in what she calls "*al-khuṭūrah al-muthīrah*," or "pleasurable danger," and "*al-ru' b al-muthīr*," or "pleasurable fear."<sup>75</sup> It is only through the intercession of her husband that she is able to resist her beloved and the transcendent pleasures of their coupling. However, the snake simply punctures another hole in the bedroom wall through which to enter the chamber in order to unite with her lover. Rifaat thus highlights the multiple ways in which men obstruct women's spiritual knowledge and sensuous pleasure—a motif across many of her short stories. The narrator's encounters with the jinn not only awaken and sate her sexual drives, but they also intensify her inquisitiveness about herself and the world: "As my self-questioning (*tasā'ulī*) increased so did my yearning, my curiosity (*al-fuḍūl*), my desire."<sup>76</sup> By coupling

<sup>70</sup> Rifaat, "My World of the Unknown," 72; Rifaat, "'Ālamī al-Majhūl," 60.

<sup>71</sup> Rifaat, "My World of the Unknown," 72.

<sup>72</sup> Rifaat, "My World of the Unknown," 72.

<sup>73</sup> Rifaat, "My World of the Unknown," 73.

<sup>74</sup> Rifaat, "My World of the Unknown," 73.

<sup>75</sup> Rifaat, "My World of the Unknown," 70 and 73; Rifaat, "'Ālamī al-Majhūl," 58 and 61; translations modified.

<sup>76</sup> Rifaat, "My World of the Unknown," 71; Rifaat, "'Ālamī al-Majhūl," 60.

desire with intellectual and spiritual curiosity, Rifaat situates Islamic modes of embodied knowledge within an explicitly queer encounter.

Although the jinn initially appears in serpentine form and their first sexual encounter is clearly marked as one between a woman and a snake, she transmogrifies into a woman over the course of their relationship. The story references her “fingers,” “radiant hands,” “delicate mouth,” and even “golden hair.”<sup>77</sup> When the narrator questions the queerness of their relationship and suggests that a man’s physiognomy would be a more “natural” fit for “a love affair,” the jinn notes that “perfect beauty is to be found only in a woman.”<sup>78</sup> The jinn describes female beauty using language ripe with spiritual connotations: from the superlative “*anaqā*” (the purest) to the phrase “*al-jamāl al-kāmil*” (complete/perfect beauty)—echoing *al-insān al-kāmil*, or “the perfect human,” which often refers to the Prophet Muhammad as the exemplar ethical human. In Sufism, and particularly the work of the philosopher Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240), the phrase can be used to reference mystics who attain divine knowledge and spiritual self-realization.<sup>79</sup> Rifaat thus aligns transcendence with both female beauty and bodily pleasure; it is only through a physical relationship with the jinn that the narrator is able to access another plane of spiritual existence.

Although the narrator’s sexual union with the jinn is clearly of the flesh, it is also within the sanctioned realm of Islam, as the Shaykh’s blessing indicates. Their union is ritually and textually avowed when, at the suggestion of the jinn, they recite Qur’anic passages (literally god’s verses or آيات الله) over a bowl of water that is sprinkled around the perimeter of the house in order to cement the pact between their worlds.<sup>80</sup> Joining hands as if in human betrothal, the jinn avows their marriage in a speech act: “Bride of mine ... I have wedded you, so there is no sin (*khaṭī‘ah*) in our love, nothing to reproach yourself about.”<sup>81</sup> Not only does the ceremony mobilize scripture to affirm sensuous pleasure, but Rifaat stages marital union outside of heterosexual pair bonds—notably, between two different genera of sentient beings who are gendered female.

Boasting of the multitude of “beautiful women” she has provided “bliss” to, the jinn explains that she has intimate relations only with women.<sup>82</sup> Rifaat literalizes the Islamic multiverse by referring to the jinn as a “monarch” and her world as a “kingdom”—implying that she reigns over an alternative domain to terrestrial forms of heteropatriarchy.<sup>83</sup> Their union also functions as a kind of species bond between the world of humankind and jinn in their earthly form of snakes. This suggests that the jinn’s queer unions contribute to cosmological harmony not only between various sentient beings, but also across the kingdom

<sup>77</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 73–75.

<sup>78</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 75.

<sup>79</sup> The concept of the “divine feminine” was also central to Ibn ‘Arabī’s cosmology. See Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 71–75 and 173–202.

<sup>80</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 73; Rifaat, “‘Ālamī al-Majhūl,” 63.

<sup>81</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 73; Rifaat, “‘Ālamī al-Majhūl,” 62.

<sup>82</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 72.

<sup>83</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 72–73.

of the natural world. Critical of human speciesism, the story's queer ethics thus encapsulates a holistic vision of all life-forms.

The narrator and her beloved continue their love affair for months, shuttling unperceived between the world of the visible and the world of the invisible (*'ālam al-ghayb*). She describes her ability to “pass with amazing speed between this tangible world of ours and another invisible earth, mixing in the two worlds on one and the same day, as though living it twice over.”<sup>84</sup> The only legible sign of their relationship is the suggestive hole in the wall through which the snake enters her bedroom. During this period the narrator is out of sync with the phenomenological world, relegating their sexual union to a form of queer time. No longer participating in what Elizabeth Freeman dubs *chrononormativity*—namely, “the interlocking temporal schemes necessary for genealogies of descent and for the mundane workings of domestic life”<sup>85</sup>—the narrator becomes “unaware of the passage of time” and finds herself “no longer calculating time or counting the days.”<sup>86</sup> Their love affair transports the narrator to a world order marked by “queer asynchronies” that rejects the confines of “domestic time, a particular heterogendered and class-inflected chrononormativity.”<sup>87</sup>

The narrator's escalating love affair with the snake removes her from the heteropatriarchal demands of her marital and maternal life. Throughout the story her family is referred to only in passing; we never learn the name of her husband or anything about their children. Yet she dwells in exquisite detail on the jinn and their carnal sojourns. Inhabiting another world, the narrator spends her days lounging in bed and lost in thought, disinterested in her family and the domesticated forms of labor they have come to expect. When her husband (mis)hears her cries of ecstasy, he calls a doctor who interprets her impassioned love as female hysteria and tellingly diagnoses her with “nervous depression.”<sup>88</sup> Rifaat thus recasts the literary trope of the bored bourgeois wife and mother by framing the narrator's antiwork as a site of spiritual and sexual transformation.

In order to participate in this otherworldly realm, the narrator, and Aneesa before her, must withdraw from their world. Unprotected by bourgeois class privilege, however, Aneesa is treated as an abject social outcast. We learn that she fled to the Nile delta house with her young son after her husband “caught her in an act of infidelity.”<sup>89</sup> During this time, she was often heard “conversing with unknown persons,” passed her days in “silence and isolation,” and “wandered about in a dream world.”<sup>90</sup> Aneesa's affect, speech, and demeanor are repeatedly described as uncanny and strange (*gharīb*).<sup>91</sup> Her social ostracization exposes the

<sup>84</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 61.

<sup>85</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), xxii.

<sup>86</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 69; Rifaat, “‘Ālamī al-Majhūl,” 76.

<sup>87</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, backmatter and 39.

<sup>88</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 74.

<sup>89</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 67.

<sup>90</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 67.

<sup>91</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 63.

ways in which women who challenge heteropatriarchal norms—particularly mystics—are frequently pathologized as hysterics and sexual deviants.

When confronting Aneesa about her unwillingness to leave their newly leased home, the narrator offers her a position as a housekeeper. An insulted Aneesa flatly rejects the proposition, declaring “I am not a servant. I’m Aneesa.”<sup>92</sup> She at once refuses the class dynamics imposed upon her by the narrator and affirms her autonomous selfhood. Considered alongside the narrator’s inability to properly inhabit bourgeois domesticity, Aneesa’s response foregrounds the jinn’s disruption of class politics. As a queer figure, the jinn thus upends patriarchal and classed modes of social reproduction while exposing their mutual imbrication.

### Unknown Worlds

While to the outside world she may appear disengaged, the narrator’s interior life is vibrant and abounding with profound pleasure and self-discovery. Her intoxicated reverie recalls the Sufi states of *ḥayrah* (the bewilderment and ecstatic wonder that an initiate experiences on their spiritual journey as they approach the divine), *sukr* (an internal intoxication often paired with outward conscious awareness or *ṣaḥw*), and *‘ishq* (passionate love for the beloved/divine that can border on madness), which are common tropes in Sufi literature.<sup>93</sup>

It is “through the bond of love” she shares with the jinn that the narrator is able to enter the world beyond time and space alluded to in the story’s title.<sup>94</sup> In the opening frame narrative, she declares: “There are many mysteries in life, many unseen powers in the universe (*al-kathīr min al-quwā ghayr al-manzūrah fī al-kawn*), other worlds than our world, hidden links (*rawābiṭ khafīyyah*) and radiations that draw creatures together such that they affect one another.”<sup>95</sup> The narrator, however, is skeptical about this world’s existence and begins to wonder if she is merely imagining their relationship. When she expresses doubt, her beloved retorts:

And do intelligent humans have to have something tangible as evidence? By God, do you not believe in His ability to create worlds and living beings (*‘awālim wa-ḥayawāt*)? Do you know that you have an existence in worlds other than that of matter and annihilation (*‘awālim ukhrā ghayr ‘ālam al-māddah wa-l-fanā*)?<sup>96</sup>

As the jinn explains, their relationship is evidence of beings and realms beyond the phenomenological world of matter and physical death. Critiquing positivist and empiricist epistemes, she notes the limits of human knowledge amid the vastness of divine poesis. The jinn mobilizes Sufi conceptual language, such as

<sup>92</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 65.

<sup>93</sup> Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt*, 161–62.

<sup>94</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 61.

<sup>95</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 61; Rifaat, “‘Ālamī al-Majhūl,” 45; translation modified.

<sup>96</sup> Rifaat, “My World of the Unknown,” 74; Rifaat, “‘Ālamī al-Majhūl,” 63; translation modified.



the term *fanā'*—meaning “extinction, passing away, cessation of being, evanescence, vanishing, annihilation, utter destruction, total ruin,” which signals the dissolution of self that accompanies union with the divine.<sup>97</sup> That the narrator’s physical relationship with the jinn initiates an interior journey speaks to the ways in which Islam cultivates embodied forms of knowledge and spiritual praxis.

The figuration of the jinn as a serpent is a telling symbol in this regard. During the pre-Islamic period, jinn were often associated with serpents and both “were imagined as living close to the invisible realm” because of their predilection for liminal and heterotopic spaces.<sup>98</sup> In the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve are prohibited from consuming fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. When a serpent persuades Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, which Adam also tastes, they are expelled from Eden. In the Qur’anic account, the tree is referred to simply as “the tree” or “the tree of life eternal (*al-khuld*),” and it is Iblīs (Satan) who tells Adam and Eve that God has forbidden them from eating the fruit in order to prevent them from becoming angels.<sup>99</sup> Across both the biblical and Qur’anic accounts, consumption of the forbidden fruit is tied to mortal knowledge; specifically, it makes Adam and Eve aware of their physical nakedness, prompting them to cover their bodies. In addition to inverting the moral of the biblical account to figure the serpent as Eve’s mystical guide to sensuous and spiritual fulfillment, Rifaat cites from the Qur’anic verse in which the parable appears. The prayer recited by the Shaykh, “رب زدني علما” (“O Lord, increase me in knowledge”), is the Prophet Muhammad’s prayer during his revelations.<sup>100</sup> As the account of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden immediately follows this prayer, Rifaat intertextually links the narrator’s acquisition of knowledge with both the prophetic revelations and the parable of Eve.<sup>101</sup>

As Iblīs promises eternal life rather than knowledge, Qur’anic translator and commentator Muhammad Asad reads the tree as “an allegory for the limits which the Creator has set to man’s desires and actions.”<sup>102</sup> He notes that Adam and Eve’s wish for eternal life on earth—as opposed to in the hereafter—is incompatible with Qur’anic cosmology and divine providence. Asad interprets the pair’s awareness of their nakedness as a reference to “the garment of God-consciousness,” suggesting that they become cognizant of their absolute “dependence on God.”<sup>103</sup> The sura subsequently couples self-knowledge with spiritual awareness through the sensuous imagery of the body as the site of embodied knowledge.

<sup>97</sup> M. Baalbaki and R. Baalbaki, *al-Mawrid*, 835.

<sup>98</sup> El Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*, 98.

<sup>99</sup> Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, 539n106.

<sup>100</sup> Qur’an 20:114.

<sup>101</sup> See Qur’an 20:115–21. Since one of the primary themes of this sura, Tā Ha (“O Man”), is that “the fundamental truths inherent in all revealed religions are identical,” the reference further links the biblical and Qur’anic accounts of Eden (Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, 524).

<sup>102</sup> Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, 540n106.

<sup>103</sup> Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, 540n107.

Linking the biblical and Qur'anic accounts, Rifaat at once conjures and upends the story of Adam and Eve's expulsion. The serpent in her story is not a satanic figure of temptation, but rather, a source of carnal and spiritual knowledge that enables the narrator to experience the fullness of divine cosmology. If the biblical and Qur'anic parables suggest the limits of human agentive knowledge in the face of divine edicts—with Eve signaling the breach of this threshold—then I read Rifaat's story as a remythologization across queer and feminist registers.<sup>104</sup> In her account, the authoritarian figure delimiting knowledge, both spiritual and sensuous, is not divine, but rather heteropatriarchal. The blissful union between the jinn and narrator is tellingly brought to an abrupt end when her husband kills a garden snake, thereby breaking the sacred pact among the human, natural, and divine realms.

Rifaat's "My World of the Unknown," mobilizes Sufi imagery and cosmology, alongside the textual authority of the Qur'an, to stage a queer intervention into Muslim women's spirituality and sexuality. Disrupting liberatory feminist narratives that situate agency within strictly secular paradigms, Rifaat offers a model of feminist self-actualization rooted in spiritual praxis. Her story further challenges the privatized labor of marriage and motherhood through the narrative's queer temporality. The narrator's transgressions of the binaries of the human/divine, erotic/ecstatic, and phenomenological/transcendental demonstrate the ability of Sufi poetics to open up other ontological and epistemic worlds.

### Poetics of the Ineffable

Mansour Ez-Eldin's 2010 short story, "Jinniyyāt al-Nīl" ("Faeries of the Nile"), similarly mobilizes the figure of the jinn to unsettle heteropatriarchal structures. The story's protagonist, Zeenat, communes with a group of female jinn who appear along the banks of the Nile by her home. Unlike "My World of the Unknown," which immerses us into the narrator's consciousness, Ez-Eldin alternates between an omniscient third-person narration and the perspective of Zeenat's abusive husband. The story also moves between the past and diegetic present, where her estranged husband is bedridden following a car accident that took the life of their young son.

Lured by their melodious voices in "a language she didn't understand," Zeenat first sees the Nile apparitions as a plume of "dancing" white smoke that morphs into "spectral female bodies spinning in coquettish embrace."<sup>105</sup> They eventually "transmogrify into flesh-and-blood bodies" with nearly translucent skin.<sup>106</sup> As with Rifaat's protagonist, Zeenat's gradual acceptance of the jinn shifts from

<sup>104</sup> Rifaat indexes Cleopatra's rumored turn to snake-lovers over men (Rifaat, "My World of the Unknown," 71; Rifaat, "Ālamī al-Majhūl," 59).

<sup>105</sup> Mansoura Ez-Eldin, "Faeries on the Nile," *The Granta Book of the African Short Story*, ed. Helon Habila, trans. Raphael Cohen (London: Granta, 2011), 18; Mansoura Ez-Eldin, "Jinniyyāt al-Nīl," *Naḥw al-Junūn* (Cairo: Dār Mīrīt, 2013), 79; translation modified.

<sup>106</sup> Ez-Eldin, "Faeries on the Nile," 19; Ez-Eldin, "Jinniyyāt al-Nīl," 80.

“fear” (*al-khawf*) to “curiosity” (*fuḍūlan*) to “desire” (*al-raqhbah*).<sup>107</sup> Emboldened by her growing attraction to the jinn, Zeenat is quickly consumed by a “desperate, humiliating desire (*raqhbah mudhillah yā’isah*) to fuse with these luminous, diaphanous bodies (*al-ajsād al-nūrāniyyah al-shaffāfah*).”<sup>108</sup>

Although she had never before encountered such creatures, Zeenat recalls her mother’s stories of “sacred” (*haramah*) jinn who protect the Nile banks.<sup>109</sup> Never doubting their existence, she intuitively knows of their beauty and ability to “inhabit human bodies” (*al-hulūl fi’ajsād bashariyyah*).<sup>110</sup> This knowledge is described in ontological and cosmological terms: “She knows this like she knows that the sun is the sun, the moon is the moon, and the night is the night.”<sup>111</sup> As with Rifaat, jinn are not only gendered female, but also associated with matrilineal genealogies and epistemes. Appearing exclusively to Zeenat, the jinn serve as a corrective to the indignities of her marriage, offering both spiritual and sensuous comfort.

The jinn are only visible during *jum‘ah* prayers as the “rising voice of the Friday preacher” reverberates in the background.<sup>112</sup> The cotemporality of these encounters with the weekly congregational prayer and sermon suggests that they function as an alternative form of spiritual communion to the sanctioned public spaces of male piety. As with Rifaat’s story, this sacred experience is accented with both gendered and sexual implications. The female jinn facilitate, on the one hand, a homosocial spiritual praxis, and on the other, a homoerotics of sexual desire and pleasure. Zeenat protects this relationship with the intimacy of a personal faith practice and the secrecy of a love affair. She ritually cleans and purifies the site as if it were a sacred shrine—dusting the floor and sprinkling it with rose-scented water, similar to the Shaykh’s purification ritual in Rifaat’s story.

The camphorwood trees populating the site where the jinn appear are another motif with distinctly spiritual overtones. A natural preservative with antibacterial properties, the scented crystal compound from camphor trees is an integral part of *ghusl* or Muslim ritual washing practices for the dead. Initially attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, many Muslims continue to wash corpses in camphorated water before they are shrouded and buried.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, the “symbolic ‘drink’ of divine knowledge” available to believers in paradise is described in the Qur’an (76:5) as a camphor spring (*‘ayn*). By directly linking the jinn to both Friday prayers and the camphorwood trees, Ez-Eldin emphasizes

<sup>107</sup> Ez-Eldin, “Faeries on the Nile,” 19; Ez-Eldin, “Jinniyyāt al-Nil,” 80.

<sup>108</sup> Ez-Eldin, “Faeries on the Nile,” 19; Ez-Eldin, “Jinniyyāt al-Nil,” 80; translation modified.

<sup>109</sup> Ez-Eldin, “Faeries on the Nile,” 19; Ez-Eldin, “Jinniyyāt al-Nil,” 80. The term *حرمة* connotes sacredness but is also etymologically linked to the root *حرم*, signaling prohibition and interdiction; M. Baalbaki and R. Baalbaki, *al-Mawrid*, 465.

<sup>110</sup> Ez-Eldin, “Faeries on the Nile,” 19; Ez-Eldin, “Jinniyyāt al-Nil,” 80; translation modified.

<sup>111</sup> Ez-Eldin, “Faeries on the Nile,” 19; Ez-Eldin, “Jinniyyāt al-Nil,” 80; translation modified.

<sup>112</sup> Ez-Eldin, “Faeries on the Nile,” 19.

<sup>113</sup> *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures: Family, Body, Sexuality and Health*, ed. Afsaneh Najmabadi and Suad Joseph (Belgium: Brill, 2003), 119. According to hadith, the Prophet instructed the women preparing his daughter Zaynab’s corpse to wash her with camphorated water. See Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 1254 Book 23: Funerals (*al-Janā’iz*) Hadith 345 (<https://sunnah.com/bukhari:1254>).

their role as spiritual intermediaries occupying the threshold space of the *barzakh* that separates the living from the dead and humans from jinn.

Zeenat continues to commune with the jinn every Friday, until she is delayed one afternoon while shopping for her husband at the weekly market. After her missed appointment, she refuses to visit the Friday market again. In so doing, Zeenat substitutes domestic labor for her own spiritual advancement and, eventually, sexual fulfillment. Following one of her husband's verbal outbursts, Zeenat visits the sacred site between the camphorwood trees where the jinn's mesmerizing "ceremony" induces a spiritual ecstasy that culminates in sexual release:<sup>114</sup>

Her desire to merge into and with them intensified (*izdādat raghbatuhā fi al-indimāj bihinna wa-ma'ahunna*). She felt intoxicated (*nashwah*), as though she had shed many cares (*humūm*) that she couldn't exactly define but whose existence she could sense (*tuḥiss bi-wujūdihā*). Cares accumulated since time immemorial, before she was even born ... before everything and anything.<sup>115</sup>

As she physically approaches the jinn, Zeenat enters a spiritual state akin to *taṣawwuf* in which she is overcome by vertigo (*duwār*) and "the world as she knew it transformed" (*taghayyara al-'ālam kamā ta'rifuhu*).<sup>116</sup> Introduced to new ways of being and knowing, Zeenat is in perfect harmony with the universe, which "was spinning with her."<sup>117</sup> As with Rifaat's story, this union encompasses the broader natural world, insofar as the trees participate in the ceremony by transforming into ether so that the jinn may dance through them.

Encircling Zeenat, the jinn shape-shift from numerous phantom women into a bright flame, eventually "merging" into a single being emanating beauty and light "with black hair that almost reached the ground, and eyes split lengthwise, milky translucent skin and an irreducibly sweet voice."<sup>118</sup> Now equipped with human hands, the jinn sings melodiously as she caresses Zeenat and fills her body with warmth. Their sublime union engenders ecstatic euphoria alongside physical and metaphysical transformation:

With eyes closed and trembling, she felt the world shaking around her. She tried to scream, but her voice was hoarse. She tried to cry but couldn't. She surrendered [*istaslamat*—the same verb used for Rifaat's narrator] to the shaking, the trembling, the hand stroking her body, oblivious to everything but the moment she is living now.<sup>119</sup>

Straddling the spiritual and sensuous, Zeenat's encounter with the jinn pulls her into a transcendental eternal present. She becomes tuned into the singular

<sup>114</sup> Ez-Eldin, "Faeries on the Nile," 26.

<sup>115</sup> Ez-Eldin, "Faeries on the Nile," 26; Ez-Eldin, "Jinniyyāt al-Nīl," 90; translation modified.

<sup>116</sup> Ez-Eldin, "Faeries on the Nile," 26; Ez-Eldin, "Jinniyyāt al-Nīl," 90; translation modified.

<sup>117</sup> Ez-Eldin, "Faeries on the Nile," 26; Ez-Eldin, "Jinniyyāt al-Nīl," 90.

<sup>118</sup> Ez-Eldin, "Faeries on the Nile," 26; Ez-Eldin, "Jinniyyāt al-Nīl," 91; translation modified.

<sup>119</sup> Ez-Eldin, "Faeries on the Nile," 26; Ez-Eldin, "Jinniyyāt al-Nīl," 91; translation modified.

harmony of existence—akin to the divine oneness of *tawhīd*—hence the mapping of her phenomenological experience (shaking) onto the external world.

The loss of her faculty of speech suggests that Zeenat comes to inhabit a new spiritual ontology aligned with both the ascetic and embodied dimensions of Sufism. This extra-discursive site transcends not only patriarchal spaces of religious orthodoxy, but also the symbolic order of language. Highlighting the “relationship between mysticism and apophysis,” Sufism dwells at “the limits of language and the sayable, that which can and that which cannot be said, written, spoken of, in relation to desire, belief and the sacred.”<sup>120</sup> In place of language, the jinn introduce a sensuous otherworldly soundscape composed of rhythmic musical voices. During their first encounter, Zeenat describes the jinn “sway [ing] to imperceptible rhythms that render outward existence totally silent” and refers to their “music of unknown origin”—invoking the same term (*majhūl*) that titles Rifaat’s story.<sup>121</sup> In their final meeting, however, “she perceived the rhythms of the musical voices more clearly than at any time before”—suggesting that she has attained a higher degree of spiritual understanding.<sup>122</sup> Music here functions as a mode of communication tied to higher spiritual faculties and states, as in the case of *dhikr*.<sup>123</sup> The emphasis on the unknown further links the sensuous world of sonic rhythm to spiritual epistemes—particularly since Zeenat learns to perceive these rhythms through her union with the jinn.

As with “My World of the Unknown,” the story’s emphasis on temporal disruption can be read as a form of queer time that Zeenat inhabits while with the jinn. Rejecting her husband’s demands for domestic labor, she forgoes the Friday market in favor of spiritual and sensuous fulfillment. Losing all sense of time, Zeenat is found by her husband unconscious, naked, and prostrate on the ground. Her state of undress echoes the erotically charged description of her experience, while also suggesting that Zeenat has entered a spiritual state of purity (*tahārah*), in which she is unfettered by the materiality of physical existence. With blunted affect the husband confesses to beating his wife upon finding her, before confining her to the bedroom for weeks. Although he refuses to believe her account of the apparitions and describes her transformation through the pathologizing lens of female hysteria—similar to the doctor in “My World of the Unknown”—Zeenat’s husband ultimately confesses that “in truth, there was no explanation.”<sup>124</sup>

<sup>120</sup> Ziad Elmarsafy, *Sufism in the Contemporary Arabic Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 8. Syrian poet and theorist Adonis examines the intersections between Sufism and surrealism as ontologies of being tied to aesthetic practices; see Adūnīs, *al-Ṣūfīyyah wa-l-Sūryāliyyah* (London: Dār al-Sāqī, 1992), and Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, trans. Judith Cumberbatch (London: Saqi, 1995). Similarly, for a discussion of how Sufi po/ethics “theorize[s] the aesthetic dimensions of *tasawwuf*, in which spiritual experience is at once enacted and expressed through conceptual language and symbolization” see Hoda El Shakry, “Abdelwahab Meddeb and the Po/Ethics of Sufism,” *Expressions Maghrebines* 16 (2017): 95–115, esp. 98.

<sup>121</sup> Ez-Eldin, “Faeries on the Nile,” 18; Ez-Eldin, “Jinniyyāt al-Nīl,” 79.

<sup>122</sup> Ez-Eldin, “Faeries on the Nile,” 26.

<sup>123</sup> *Dhikr* refers to the devotional rhythmic repetition of words or phrases in praise of God. On jinn and music, see El Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*, 74.

<sup>124</sup> Ez-Eldin, “Faeries on the Nile,” 21.

Although the jinn never return, Zeenat's son is born within a year of her otherworldly union. In the absence of the jinn, he becomes her sole love-object, and his accidental death at the hands of her husband extends Ez-Eldin's critique of the violence of heteropatriarchy. Her husband not only serves as a physical and psychic barrier to Zeenat's spiritual and sexual life, but he sabotages the heterosexual fantasy of reproductive futurity through his unintentional filicide. By the story's end, however, he is bedridden and reliant on his wife for all his needs. Ez-Eldin emphasizes the smallness of his existence by describing how his days are spent watching his wife through the little window in his room, which becomes his "only link with the outside world."<sup>125</sup>

Meanwhile, Zeenat keeps a weekly "silent vigil" by the riverbank.<sup>126</sup> Even though the jinn never reappear, Ez-Eldin hints at their transformative effect. The story concludes:

But after many years, when she had lost her son and her husband had fallen ill and become bedridden, she started to sense a similar silence at that same time every week. An absolute silence (*ṣamt muṭbiq*), followed by nothing. Staring straight ahead, between the camphorwood trees, she would try by means of memory to recreate the companions of the past and restore them to existence, without any success. She would only see them in her mind's eye when she closed her eyes and listened to the silence surrounding her.<sup>127</sup>

Zeenat's ability to see the jinn, literally with the eyes of her imagination (*bi-ʿaynay khayālihā*), or a kind of third eye, highlights her continued ability to sense other worlds and their beings. Her physical encounter with the jinn endows her with an internalized form of spiritual knowledge—signaled by the "similar silence" she experiences when she approaches the camphorwood trees.<sup>128</sup> This knowledge crucially must be experienced through the body before it can be known in the mind or felt in the spirit.

### Knowing Bodies

The forms of embodied knowledge represented in Mansoura Ez-Eldin's and Alifa Rifaat's stories recall Saba Mahmood's argument that outward comportment cultivates—rather than reflects—inward forms of spirituality. She underscores the need to "carefully examine the *work that bodily practices perform* in creating a subject that is pious in its formation."<sup>129</sup> Although Mahmood's theory of agency as an ethical formation enacted through the body centers more conventional pious practices, such as veiling, I would like to consider it alongside the mystical philosophy indexed by both Rifaat and Ez-Eldin. The body occupies a complex

<sup>125</sup> Ez-Eldin, "Faeries on the Nile," 25.

<sup>126</sup> Ez-Eldin, "Faeries on the Nile," 21.

<sup>127</sup> Ez-Eldin, "Faeries on the Nile," 30; Ez-Eldin, "Jinniyyāt al-Nīl," 95; translation modified.

<sup>128</sup> A silent withdrawal from the world is a frequent motif in Sufi poetic and philosophical literature and appears across Rifaat's and Ez-Eldin's stories.

<sup>129</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 160; emphasis in the original.

place within the heterogenous beliefs and practices catalogued under Sufism. Rather than simply privileging corporeal transcendence, mystical ontologies often explore the dialogic movement between interiority (*bāṭin*) and exteriority (*zāhir*), which is crucially mediated through bodily practices.<sup>130</sup> I argue that the sensuous encounters with jinn described in Rifaat and Ez-Eldin's stories introduce intimate knowledge practices that upend, on the one hand, the heteropatriarchal reproduction of the nuclear family, and on the other, gender segregated piety.

Gender segregation in houses of worship, restrictions on menstruating women, and interdicts against women imamates or clergy reflect patriarchal assumptions about the chaotic power of women's sexuality to disrupt sacred spaces.<sup>131</sup> As Sa'diyya Shaikh suggests, this false binary pitting "the transcendent divine" against "the immanent female body" ultimately amplifies the coupling of sexuality and spirituality.<sup>132</sup> Treating public spaces of piety as protected sites of male "spiritual sanctity" thus renders women's bodies and spirituality as both hostile and secondary to the androcentric norm.<sup>133</sup> Turning to the monistic metaphysics of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of being) in the writing of Ibn 'Arabi and his followers, Shaikh posits that Sufism offers a more gender-inclusive spiritual ontology.<sup>134</sup> Its emphasis on inner states attenuates the over-sexualization of women implied in patriarchal religious doctrines and practices. Moreover, ritual devotional practices highlight the centrality of bodily comportment to Muslim ethics. Ibn 'Arabi is once again instructive, insofar as his "worldview, which integrates notions of humanity's intimacy with God and views creation as a sphere of divine manifestation, were also accompanied by positive evaluations of materiality, of embodiment, and of women."<sup>135</sup>

What the work of Mahmood and Shaikh, alongside other feminist scholars of Islam—such as Kecia Ali, Asma Barlas, and Amina Wadud—offers us is an alternative heuristic for addressing the relationship between the body and spirit that disrupts the androcentric biases of hermeneutical conventions.<sup>136</sup> These critical interventions parallel those in queer studies, whose turn to phenomenology

<sup>130</sup> On the body and Sufism, see Scott S. Kugle, *Sufis and Saints' Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, and Sacred Power in Islam* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), and Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2103). On "the transcendental turn in Islamic mysticism" in relation to embodiment, see Nasrin Qader, *Narratives of Catastrophe: Boris Diop, Ben Jelloun, Khatibi* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 186; and Hoda El Shakry, "The Ontology of Becoming," *PMLA* 137.2 (2022): 370–80. For an exploration of psychoanalytic theories of the soul and body inflected by Sufi mystical literature, see Omnia El Shakry, *The Arabic Freud: Psychoanalysis and Islam in Modern Egypt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>131</sup> This is by no means particular to Islam, as the parable of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis clearly demonstrates.

<sup>132</sup> Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 8.

<sup>133</sup> Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 8–9.

<sup>134</sup> Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 16.

<sup>135</sup> Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 17.

<sup>136</sup> Shaikh situates the project of Islamic feminism between a "hermeneutics of suspicion" and a "hermeneutics of reconstruction"; *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 22. See also Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016 [2006]); Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of

“emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds.”<sup>137</sup>

When read alongside the critical projects of queer studies, Islamic feminism, and the anthropology of Islam, “My World of the Unknown” and “Faeries of the Nile” reveal how embodiment shapes women’s lifeworlds across the intersecting vectors of sex/uality and spirituality. Bridging these ways of reading, I am attuned not only to the vexed politics of hermeneutical dogmatism, but crucially to how literary practices shape the reception of cultural production from the global south—particularly from and about Arab Muslim women—which comes into relief when we read Rifaat and Ez-Eldin dialectically. By staging sexual encounters with jinn, their stories model queer forms of sociality that unsettle heteropatriarchal social orders and knowledge practices. They do so by drawing extensively upon Sufi conceptual language, imagery, and cosmology in which the body is pivotal to the path of *taṣawwuf*. Centering queer feminist epistemologies, these speculative stories shed light on the diverse expressions of Muslim spiritual praxis in ways that unsettle rigid binaries of the mind/body, spiritual/sensuous, human/nonhuman, and transcendent/immanent.

Much of the reception of Rifaat and Ez-Eldin’s writing has been filtered through the market logics of world literature and genre fiction, whereby certain “worlds [are] foreclosed by particular modes of reading.”<sup>138</sup> Specifically, secularizing reading practices tend to flatten spiritual lifeworlds—beyond, of course, the liberal saving Muslim women from Muslim men trope—in the service of literary sensibilities conditioned by distinct notions of the role of “religion” within social and cultural life. In this sense, I follow Michael Allan’s accenting of world literature “less as an accumulation of texts from across different literary traditions than as the globalization of literary hermeneutics.”<sup>139</sup> To read “My World of the Unknown” and “Faeries of the Nile” against this critical grain is to take seriously their spiritual cosmologies as well as their explicitly queer libidinal and social imaginaries. In so doing, we can envisage a queer ethics

---

Texas Press, 2019 [2002]); and Amina Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>137</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2006), 2. Ahmed adds that “Feminist, queer, and critical race philosophers have shown how social differences are the effects of how bodies inhabit spaces with others, and they have emphasized the intercorporeal aspects of bodily writing” (5). Petrus Liu similarly notes how voices from the global south can critically enrich theorizations of the relationship between materiality and the body in queer studies, which has been dominated by Euro-American identity politics; see “Queer Theory and the Specter of Materialism,” *Social Text* 145 38.4 (December 2020): 25–47. To that point, it is no coincidence that some of Saba Mahmood’s most salient insights in *The Politics of Piety* come from a deep engagement and critical grappling with the work of Judith Butler on gender, embodiment, and ethics. See Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* and Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York and Abingdon, Canada: Routledge, 2011 [1993]).

<sup>138</sup> Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature*, 4.

<sup>139</sup> Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature*, 41.



not only commensurable with, but rather enriched by, Muslim lifeworlds and epistemes.

**Competing interest.** None.

**Author biography.** Hoda El Shakry is Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Chicago. Her research centers on twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural production from North Africa and the Middle East, with an emphasis on the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. She writes and teaches across the fields of Arabic and Francophone literatures, aesthetic theory, Islamic philosophy, film and visual culture, speculative fiction, as well as gender and sexuality studies. Her first book, *The Literary Qur'an: Narrative Ethics in the Maghreb* (Fordham University Press, 2020) was awarded the MLA's 2020 Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for Comparative Literary Studies.

---

**Cite this article:** El Shakry, Hoda. 2024. "Jinn and Jins: Sensuous Piety as Queer Ethics." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 11, 123–147. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2023.17>