BEYOND BINARY BARZAKHS:
USING THE THEME OF LIMINALITY IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT TO QUESTION
THE GENDER BINARY

by

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Beyond Binary Barzakhs: Using the Theme of Liminality in Islamic Thought to Question the Gender Binary

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my Nani Ammi (maternal grandmother), may her strength and story live on in my spirit, and my Barray Abba (paternal grandfather), may his love of knowledge always be an inspiration in guiding me toward al-Haq, the Truth.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis Outline</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One Outline</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two Outline</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three Outline</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method: Feminist/Mystical Self-Reflexivity and the Methodical Paradox</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background Literature</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One Background Literature</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two Background Literature</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three Background Literature</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: Liminality in Islamic Traditional Thought</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(sub)liminal messages in the Qur’an</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heart as barzakh, soul as barzakh, human reality as barzakh</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: Gendered Liminality in South Asian Islamic Mystical Thought</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hopes, Heights, Divine Veiling-Unveiling</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neither-here-nor-there</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(in)conclusion</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: Liminal Spaces, Liminal faces: South Asian Hijras</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hijras: People of the Heights, Embodied</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither-here-nor-there: Neither-man-nor-woman</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing and Future Research</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

BEYOND BINARY BARZAKHS:
USING THE THEME OF LIMINALITY IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT TO QUESTION
THE GENDER BINARY

Sara Haq Hussaini, MAIS
George Mason University, 2012

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This study is an exercise in reflecting on the theme of liminality found throughout Islamic thought with a view toward questioning the gender binary. Beginning with Islamic traditional thought, the first chapter examines the Qur’anic pericope of the enigmatic People of the Heights – those who are between heaven and hell – and Ibn ‘Arabi’s metaphysical concept of barzakh or “intermediary state.” The second chapter conducts a gendered analysis of the theme of liminality in Islamic mystical thought, giving examples from the works of Rumi and contemporary South Asian poets to make the case for non-duality. Lastly, the third chapter presents a concrete illustration of some of the theoretical concepts discussed in the first two chapters, by exploring how the metaphysical and mystical ideas of liminality are embodied in the social and personal experiences of those who identify as hijras (“third genders”) in South Asia.
INTRODUCTION

In her renowned theoretical text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler proposes that all gender is a performance, questioning the concepts of “woman,” “man,” “masculine,” “feminine,” she claims that these are not biologically fixed but rather culturally created categories. Regardless of whether one agrees with Butler wholeheartedly or not, there is something to be said about the createdness of such categories, the fixedness of gender/sex categorization, the dualistic framing of gender binaries. In the last line of her book, this leading gender theorist of our time puts forth the following question: “What other local strategies for engaging the “unnatural” might lead to the denaturalization of gender as such?”¹ This thesis is an effort toward an intra-disciplinary strategy for engaging the super/supra-natural (i.e. religio-spirituality, metaphysics, mysticism, theology) to see if it leads us toward the “denaturalization” of gender as such. In other words, the purpose of this paper is to reflect on dualistic modes of thinking by weaving a gendered analysis of Islamic metaphysical thought – specifically focusing on the theme of “liminality.”

The trope of “liminality” or “liminal spaces” is found throughout Islamic metaphysical thought as well as throughout feminist theory. The word liminality comes from the Latin term *limen*, meaning “a threshold.” In contemporary Western context,

liminality is often used to refer to that subjective state – psychological, metaphysical, neurological – conscious or unconscious, of being on the “threshold” of something, or being in-between two different existential planes.\(^2\) It is used in various theoretical concepts including psychological (i.e., “liminal state”) and anthropological theories. For example, one explanation of the term states, it refers to “in-between situations and conditions that are characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of tradition and future outcomes.”\(^3\) In gender theory, liminality is often discussed in the context of transgender or transsexual identities, but rarely in terms of transcending the gender/sexuality binary mode of thought, i.e., male/female, homosexual/heterosexual.

The theme of liminality in Islamic metaphysical thought also refers to in-between situations and conditions characterized by the disruption and the displacement of established structured modes of thought. Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, in particular, uses the trope of liminality to connote conditions characterized by the subversion of established hierarchies, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of established religious traditions. Throughout history, Sufi thought and creative expression, particularly via performance arts, has challenged hegemonic religious beliefs and doctrines. Through irony and humor, Muslim mystics subvert the artificial categorization of human experience with a view to transcending the limitations they impose, and thereby push the limits of questioning.

THESIS OUTLINE
In the spirit of “multi-veilence,” this thesis (un)folds in a layered fashion. Each section builds upon previous ones; each chapter builds upon the last – builds not necessarily in the sense of an architectural building for example, but rather the building of flavors that takes place in cooking a complex recipe. Or in the spirit of non-linear thinking, perhaps the format of the thesis is more like a spiral illusion – simultaneously circling inwards and outwards, continuously moving. As unique and common as the finger prints imprinting this page, this thesis is as personal, and particular as it is universal.

Chapter One Outline
The first layer, or the first section of the first chapter, presents an analysis of the theme of liminality in Islamic traditional thought. In the study of Islam, the term “traditional” commonly refers to that which derives from the primary texts of Qur’an and Hadith. The Qur’an being the holy book of Muslims is unique in the sense that it is considered by Muslims to be inimitable and unalterable. It is understood to be the direct word of God, revealed to Prophet Mohammad in the seventh century over a twenty-three year period. The word “hadith” refers to the sayings of Prophet Mohammad. Combined, the Qur’an and hadith form the foundation of Islamic philosophy, Islamic law, Islamic spirituality, Islamic thought. To begin the discussion on the trope of liminality in traditional Islamic thought, we examine the Qur’anic pericope of the mysterious People of the Heights – considered to be those who occupy the borderland between heaven and hell. The borderland is described in the Qur’an as more of a “border-veil,” hence several
hadith reports suggesting the metaphysical significance of veils is discussed to illustrate the concept of veiled liminalities.

Following our discussion of the traditional texts of Qur’an and hadith, we move into Islamic metaphysics. “Metaphysics” is loosely defined as the “branch of philosophy concerned with explaining the fundamental nature of being and the world,”⁴ “although the term is not easily defined”⁵. It is commonly used interchangeably with the term “mysticism,” as it will be in parts of this study. Whether one can argue that Islamic metaphysics is part and parcel of “traditional” Islamic teachings or not, the influence of one of the most prominent metaphysicians in Islamic history, Muhyi al-Din ibn al-‘Arabi (d. 1240)⁶, is manifest in Muslim culture the world over. Ibn ‘Arabi was a 12th-13th century Andalucian mystic and metaphysician.⁷ The second section of chapter one will analyze the concept of “barzakh” or “intermediary states,”⁸ presented in the metaphysical works of Ibn ‘Arabi, as an illustration of non-duality. The main author whose work on Ibn ‘Arabi being analyzed is Sachiko Murata. Murata is a current scholar of Religion and Asian Studies at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Murata’s work incorporates not only Ibn ‘Arabi’s literary compositions, but also those of other prominent Sufi thinkers like Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi (d. 1273)⁹ among many others.

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⁵ http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/metaphysics/
⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Arabi
Chapter Two Outline

Moving from metaphysics toward mysticism, from “traditional religion” to “religion and culture,” the second chapter of this thesis conducts a gendered analysis of the theme of liminality found in South Asian Sufi poetry. Sufism is defined as the esoteric, spiritual, mystical, or “inner dimension of Islam.”10 “Mysticism” more broadly is defined as “the knowledge of, and especially the personal experience of, states of consciousness, i.e. levels of being, beyond normal human perception, including experience of and even communion with a supreme being.”11 Sufism is not only the mystical branch of Islam, it is a door that allows Muslims to move from narrowly confessional and legal/ritualistic understandings of religious truth toward more universal and unbounded explorations of human nature in relation to the Divine. Moreover, Sufism is considered to be that paint of perennial philosophy with which the Muslim world is colored.12, 13 “Perennial philosophy,” or the Latin Philosophia perennis et universalis (“eternal philosophy”), is the idea of “the universal recurrence of philosophical insight independent of epoch or culture, including universal truths on the nature of reality, humanity or consciousness.”14 This is a key point in reference to understanding that in order for Islamic intellectual thought and spiritual philosophy to contribute something

11 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mysticism
13 Raimon Panikkar, The Experience of God (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) 42.
14 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perennial_philosophy
meaningful to the world at large, it cannot only have value within (the Muslim world) but value without.  

Sufi themes are deeply ingrained in Muslim cultures throughout the world, particularly in South Asian performance arts. The chapter’s first section continues the discussion on the People of the Heights and the trope of liminality found in a popular folk song turned Sufi rock song. While Sufi Rock is a relatively new music genre, popularized in the 1990s by a Pakistani band called Junoon, Sufi themes in South Asian poetry and lyrics is anything but news. The particular song being used to illustrate the notion of Heights is sung by two young rising Pakistani artists named Qurat-ul-Ain Balouch and Khawar Jawad. Continuing the discussion of liminality, the second song being used is a famous Qawwali (South Asian Sufi devotional music) sung by the late Pakistani singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (1948-1997). While Khan popularized the genre of Qawwali internationally, the lyrics themselves are attributed to a lesser known individual, Pakistani poet Naaz Khialvi (1947-2010). Both songs are in Punjabi, an Indo-Aryan language spoken in the historical region of Punjab (north western India and central Pakistan).

The second part of the second chapter focuses on two particular Sufi works, poetically illustrating the metaphysical concept of neither-here-nor-there, one attributed to Rumi and the other to Baba Bulleh Shah (d. 1757).

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17 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naaz_Khialvi
18 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punjabi_language
19 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulleh_Shah
jurist, theologian, poet, mystic, and philosopher.\textsuperscript{20} His work has more recently been
popularized in the West partly due to its perennial themes of love and beauty. Shah was a
17\textsuperscript{th}-18\textsuperscript{th} century Punjabi poet, who lived in what is known as Pakistan today.\textsuperscript{21} His work
is viscerally intertwined with South Asian culture even today, through the creative arts of
singing and music. These discussions in chapter two draw heavily upon the theoretical
approach of Trinh T. Minh-ha, a contemporary feminist and postcolonialist theorist,
artist, writer, filmmaker, composer, and scholar.\textsuperscript{22} She is currently a professor of
Rhetoric and Women and Gender studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

\textbf{Chapter Three Outline}

The third and final chapter of this thesis examines a concrete illustration of some
of the theoretical concepts discussed in the first two chapters. The metaphysical and
mystical concepts of liminality are embodied in the social and personal experiences of
those who identify or are labeled as hijras (“third genders”) in South Asia, those who
occupy the neither-here-nor-there space in-between male and female, masculine and
feminine, homosexual and heterosexual. Throughout history and across the globe, there
have always been individuals who do not neatly fit into the sex/gender binary of male and
female, masculine and feminine.\textsuperscript{23} What Westerners label as “third gender” in much of
India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, has in recent years started to gain a more nuanced
understanding. From an outsider’s perspective, the word hijra seems to be an umbrella
term for all those who do not fit into the binaries of heterosexual male and female. Since

\textsuperscript{20} Murata 331.
\textsuperscript{21} http://www.apnaorg.com/poetry/bullahn/
\textsuperscript{22} www.trinhminh-ha.com
any departure from heteronormativity is theoretically looked down upon in these
societies, it is easy for those who fall somewhere else on the gender or sexuality spectrum
to be classified as hijras, including but not limited to homosexuals, effeminate males,
castrated males, masculine females, transgendered persons, transsexual people, those
born in “birth defects” or ambiguous genitalia, and so on.

In addition to Minh-ha’s work, the other prominent feminist whose theories are
reflected in chapter three is Lucy Lippard. Lippard is a world-renowned, American-born,
activist, curator, and author whose work focuses on feminist art.24 Minh-ha’s concept of
Othering or the perennial notion of self/other and Lippard’s concept of “turning around”
are used to further illustrate characteristics of liminal spaces embodied by hijras. The two
main authors whose work is being used to discuss hijra identity are Gayatri Reddy and
Serena Nanda. Reddy is an Indian anthropologist, and current professor in Anthropology
and Gender Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago.25 She has published arguably
one of the most thorough texts on ethnographic studies conducted among hijra population
of South India. Nanda is also an anthropologist whose work has focused on gender
diversity across the globe. She is a Professor Emerita of Anthropology at John Jay
College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York.26

The purpose of providing this basic information is so that the reader understands
the overall context (times, cultures, and places) for this study. Needless to say, the focus
of this study is not on names, dates, times, and places, but rather on themes and theories.

25 http://anthropology.las.uic.edu/people/gayatri-reddy/
26 http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/departments/anthropology/faculty.php
and what they mean for us today. The remainder of the text will focus on the theme of liminality in Islamic thought and its contribution to gender theory.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

In a world where religion and women’s rights, religion and sexual minority rights are challenging each other to ever more violent duels, it becomes imperative to address the underlying dualistic modes of thinking that contribute to these conflicts. At a time in which self-reflexivity is confounded with “sin,” studies such as these become vital. While it is taken for granted that multivalent, or in our analysis “multi-veilent” Qur’anic verses (*ayat mutashabihat*), Islamic metaphysics, and Islamic mysticism contain countless layers of meanings, it is especially rare today to find efforts to uncover or “unveil” these layers of meanings from a theoretical, philosophical, feminine, spiritual, reflective perspective. Being caged by a Western, scientific, linear, patriarchal, hegemonic mode of thought – one obsessed with rationalizing and logically dissecting everything until it loses all meaning – the study of Islam has been reduced to politics, and the study of gender in Islam to politicized women’s issues. In the same vein, the study of Sufism to a large extent has become reduced to historicizing efforts and studying exoteric rituals – for instance, much academic research on Sufism today focuses on historical analysis and Sufi shrine cultures, rather than for example theoretical analysis of Sufi philosophical thought and its applicability to social issues. In this particular thesis, my aim is to take an interdisciplinary approach to reflecting on the theme of liminal spaces as (re)presented throughout Islamic thought, and in-turn use such theoretical analysis as a philosophical
basis for studying the concept of liminal spaces in gender and sexuality, that which lies beyond the gender binary.

While most Western scholars today agree that Western feminism cannot be superimposed onto non-Western societies, once this has been established, the conversation comes to a standstill. Now more than ever, in an ever-shrinking world with ever-expanding differences – (i.e. in the Age of the Internet, we can know about gendered human rights atrocities half way across the world, yet the schism between first world feminist agendas and third world gender rights issues grows ever deeper) – it is imperative to study alternative approaches to women and gender studies, specifically feminist theory. This study is critical in illustrating how to transcend this particular dilemma. On one hand, the aim of this thesis is to shed light on the clefts and crevices that allow for airing, potential openings that allow Muslims room to breathe within the Islamic tradition. On the other hand, and more importantly, this thesis will exemplify how Islamic thought itself may have something to contribute to contemporary feminist theory, not only limited to the world and practice of Muslims, but in a larger gendered theoretical context – perhaps as a theoretical approach to and a philosophical underpinning of women/gender studies. While the embodied case in point for this paper focuses on hijras, the theories presented here have relevance far beyond South Asia and far wider than “third gender.”
METHOD:
Feminist/Mystical Self-Reflexivity and the Methodical Paradox

“What do I want wanting to know you or me?”

exhorts Minh-ha in her book Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism. In other words, why do I want to study what I am studying? Or, how studying what/who I am studying helps to deepen the understanding of what/who I am? Or, how is learning about the Other a reflection of, or a means of knowing, the Self? This concept of self-questioning, self-critiquing, self-reflectivity is found in contemporary works on feminist methodologies in social research, as well as in Sufi thought and practice. Throughout her book, Feminist Methods in Social Research, Shulamit Reinharz repeatedly discusses self-reflexivity as the key factor that sets apart feminist research from all other kinds of hegemonic, patriarchal research methods. Whether it is the “self-reflexive reporting of the interview process,” or “feminists engaged in cross-cultural research [writing] reflexive analyses of their work,” or the feminist scholar “engaged in different forms of action research...who honestly assesses what she has learned about herself,” the common thread is always one of introspection, reflecting upon the Self through the Other. Heeding Reinharz’, Minh-ha’s and Sufi sages’ advice, I have chosen a topic which is deeply and complexly intertwined with my being, not only on an academic and scholarly level, but also on a cultural, religious, and personal levels. Additionally, in the spirit of feminist as well as of mystical writing, the attempt here is to incorporate “the poetic with the analytic

27 Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989) 76.
29 Reinharz 125.
30 Reinharz 196.
and stay away from…theorizing through systematic dissection, combination, and recapitulation.”

Reinharz stresses that in order to transcend simply “fighting patriarchy,” we must produce “knowledge without being trapped into the reproduction of patriarchal ways of knowing.” The majority of her book discusses in detail some of the more common, or “traditional,” feminist ways-of-knowing: feminist interview research, feminist ethnography, feminist survey research, feminist experimental research, feminist cross-cultural research, feminist oral history, feminist content analysis, feminist case studies, feminist action research, and feminist multiple methods research. Toward the end of her text, she has a chapter titled “Original Feminist Research Methods” in which she calls for “feminist social scientists to be creative in multiple ways,” a feminist “spirit of innovation.”

While the author admits that there is no such thing as an absolutely new or absolutely original feminist research method, she insists that approaches are continuously reinvented. She reminds us that women have been studied throughout history, but much of the research has been “invisibilized” and much heritage has been lost over time. The way the feminist perspective defines “data” has been scrutinized because it is a “methodology based on everyday life” including sources such as short

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31 Minh-ha back cover.
32 Reinharz 17.
33 Reinharz 238.
34 Reinharz 239.
35 Reinharz 214.
36 Reinharz 215.
37 Reinharz 214.
stories, novels, letters, private writings, etc. Additionally, the interdisciplinary nature of feminist research methods forces one to sometimes invent words, use old words in new contexts, and be original in the choices of study samples and topics. Feminist research is a process rather than just a product, “experience rather than work, and ‘research…lived rather than…done’, an approach more than a “method.” Examples of various qualitative research methods that are used in feminist research include group diaries, focus/group interviews, drama, genealogy and network tracing, conversation/dialogue, nonauthoritative research voice, using intuition, deep identification, studying unplanned personal experience, photography, and so on. All of these examples are the feminist response to the dire need for originality and consciousness-raising dialogue in research methods. Moreover, feminism is a perspective, not a method – a transdisciplinary, interdisciplinary perspective. I would venture to go one step further to say – based on Reinharz’ earlier revelations in her book – that it is not only a perspective, but an attitude, a mindset, a self-reflexive, self-critiquing state-of-being. This self-reflexive attitude is precisely what Muslim mystics have tried to cultivate throughout the ages.

Recognizing that one is unable to absolutely suspend her subjectivities, whether they are cultural, religious, gendered, or otherwise, this thesis is an attempt to escape the trap of reproducing patriarchal ways of knowing. Recognizing that there is no such thing as an absolutely new research method, this study is an attempt to innovatively join the

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38 Reinharz 216.
39 Reinharz 217.
40 Reinharz 218.
41 Reinharz 219-239.
42 Reinharz 241.
43 Reinharz 250.
creative process of continuous reinvention. Irony and paradoxical dilemmas are a given here: recognizing that “method is a tyrannical “false god” and that ‘the tyranny of methodolatry hinders new discoveries,” the “method” employed in this research is best described as a thematic approach. Searching for the thematic thread of liminality, I begin pulling this thread found within Islamic traditional texts, continue to undo the lace of liminality running through South Asian Sufi poetry, and follow this thread until I reach the concrete social reality of “third gender” communities in South Asia, where the fabric of gender and sexual binaries utterly unravels.

In his short yet profound book, The Experience of God, Raimon Panikkar says about the title of his own book, “[it] is…a paradox, a paradox we defend because the only language possible in this case is paradoxical and oxymoronic.” While Panikkar is speaking of that which he labels as “the experience of God,” the discussion holds true if you replace the word “God” with “life” or “Self” or “gender” or “liminality.” The mystical branches of most religions, of Islam in particular, employ this paradoxical and oxymoronic language in order to convey the Ultimate Paradox. In other words, Sufism incorporates paradoxical expressions and ironic wording in poetry, spiritual anecdotes, or didactic narratives in order to allude to the d/Divine. Given the paradoxical nature of liminal spaces themselves, it is only appropriate to reflect upon one paradox with another. While we recognize that methods are false gods, in order to think aloud, in order to forge

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44 Reinharz 218.
45 Panikkar 7-8.
movement through words-on-paper, in order to discuss social issues utilizing a human language, we are forced to choose a method.

The reason I begin – or rather continue the re-creation of – the story here is to allude to the illusive nature of what we are attempting to elude. That is to say, whether we are discussing elusive Qur’anic text, or Ibn ‘Arabi’s complex metaphysics, or Rumi’s mystical poetry, or Khan’s qawwalis, or Minh-ha’s gendered philosophy, we must always be mindful of the illusive nature and the paradoxical personality that is characteristic of their work – work which is attempting to escape all that is worldly, attempting to elude all labels, while still being relayed in worldly language. For example, while Panikkar admits, “The divine mystery is ineffable and no discourse describes it,” he nevertheless dared to write over thirty books on the very topic. Or take Rumi’s example, the man who after writing 70,000 lines of poetry, declared that words are ultimately meaningless for understanding the mystery of the Divine. The same spirit of paradox, in its varying colors, is illustrated throughout the work of others whose philosophy is discussed in this study. In the same vein, this thesis may be perceived as a paradoxical work itself.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

This thesis is a truly interdisciplinary project in that it pulls together from various academic fields and thematically ties them together. Following the thread of gendered liminality, there are two main academic disciplines coming together, Islamic studies and women and gender studies. Kneading these two together, we then divide the subject matter into three sections: liminality in Islamic traditional thought, gendered liminality in

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46 Panikkar 19.
Islamic mystical thought, and finally feminist theory, Islamic thought, and the “third gender.”

Starting the journey with the revelation of Islam (Qur’an and Hadith), traveling from Middle Eastern cultures toward Persian ones, the ideas of Ibn ‘Arabi and his intellectual colleagues are reflected in the works of polymaths like Rumi. Then the journey continues from Persian cultures toward modern-day South Asia, further inspiring and shaping the works of poets such as Bulleh Shah – all of which in-turn form the silhouettes of contemporary South Asian song lyrics and popular culture. Moving continuously with time and space, these ideas of gendered liminality shape, as much as they are shaped by, the time and space through which they travel. For the sake of practicality in this study, we are limiting the discussion to the theme of gendered liminality to Islamic theoretical thought, and then illustrating some of these theories by giving a concrete example of the third-gender in South Asia.

Chapter One Background Literature: Liminality in Islamic Traditional Thought

Murata’s book *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* has become a fundamental text in the study of gender and Islam. In this profound volume, she reflects on the works of metaphysicians and mystics such as Ibn ‘Arabi and Rumi among numerous other polymaths. She analyzes Islamic teachings regarding the relationship between human and God, between the worldly and the Divine, drawing on the ingrained gender symbolism in Islamic philosophical thought. Although she has reservations labeling this a comparative study, Murata illustrates her points

\[47\] Murata 6.
about masculine/feminine, active/receptive, through the analogous teachings of the Taoist yin/yang. While this text is crucial in expounding on some of the most complex gendered metaphysics in Islamic thought, it still reiterates an extremely dualistic mode of thought, reproduces the male-female, masculine-feminine binary. It stops short of illustrating where in such readings of Islamic metaphysical thought there is room for those who are on neither side of the binary. The next step would be to pick up the baton and use Murata’s metaphysical analysis to discuss the issue of those who lie in the liminal regions of gender and sexual identity, in order to further transcend the gender binary altogether.

Following Murata’s lead on the subject, the next generation of scholars is already busy expanding on her work. Sa’diyya Shaikh’s *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ‘Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality*, is the latest text to come out on the subject. Admitting that her book builds on Murata’s life-long work, Shaikh goes on to criticize the works of Murata and her teachers. She quotes a former student of Murata’s, Laury Silvers: “Murata’s interpretations of and arguments for ‘statically relational and hierarchal’ formulations of gender and the social submission of women reflect more strongly Murata’s intellectual formation and genealogy than the texts she is analyzing.”48 While Shaikh does an excellent job pointing to the gaps and shortcomings in current readings of Ibn ‘Arabi’s work, the book does not push the conversation much beyond the place where Murata leaves it, i.e.: in attempting to conduct a theoretical analysis of Ibn ‘Arabi’s rich work and its applicability to everyday life today. It is more than peculiar for a book about gender and sexuality to come out in 2012 without having terms such as “homosexuality” and

“transgender” in its index. Shaikh’s main arguments are still whirling around issues of women’s rights in marriage (rather than, for example, questioning the institution of marriage altogether), the political hot button of the politics of veiling, and the tedious topic of women’s leadership in ritual prayer. While these may well be issues worth discussing within the prospects of Islamic feminism, one questions if they truly shift feminist ethics more broadly. Her issues-of-choice reflect more strongly Shaikh’s intellectual formation given the current political climate in the West and its attitudes toward Muslim women, rather than the texts she is analyzing. The next logical step would be to push the conversation even further: to not only respond to political hot button topics, but rather to utilize the works of Ibn ‘Arabi and his likes to add something to the conversation of gender and sexuality studies in general – to move beyond the context of Islam and Muslims alone, and be able to contribute to the larger conversation of feminism and gender rights today.

Other relevant works on the theme of liminality as found in Islamic traditional teachings include Salman Bashier’s text *Ibn Arabi’s Barzakh: The Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World*, and James Morris’ article “Spiritual Imagination and the “Liminal” World: Ibn ‘Arabi on the Barzakh.” Both Bashier and Morris add to the wealth of knowledge in regards to the theoretical concepts of duality, limits, paradox, and imagination in relationship to liminality as presented in Islamic metaphysics. But, neither researcher ventures into the relevance, application, and reflection of such analysis on issues of gender and sexuality, let alone gendered social issues today.
Chapter Two Background Literature:  
Gender and Islamic Mystical Thought

A maestro of mixing the poetic with the analytic was Professor Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003)⁴⁹, a polymath who spent her life learning-teaching-reflecting Indo-Muslim culture. While Schimmel wrote and translated countless books throughout her life, the most pertinent one for this study is titled *My Soul is a Woman: the Feminine in Islam*, written in the final years of her scholarly life. Like condensed milk, this book presents the sweet concentrate of her life’s learning. In it, Schimmel analyzes South Asian Sufi poetry and parables that speak to that which gets labeled as the esoteric, spiritual, or feminine Islam. Using texts from South Asian traditions, Schimmel reframes Islamic spirituality. Rather than directly writing a book on women’s rights, she prudently analyzes the feminine in Islam, opening the door for far more nuanced discussions on gender and sexuality in an Islamic context. While the obvious criticisms hold true – some saying that she is an Islamic apologist – any discerning reader should be able to see the light shining through the door she has left open, which if followed, leads to a world of re-creation, re-theorizing, re-feminizing, and ultimately to transcending. Simply by making the differentiation between “women in Islam” and “the feminine in Islam” she already begins the discussion with that which is esoteric and infinite rather than exoteric and limited. While Schimmel clearly shows the feminine language and symbolism used in Islamic mysticism as illuminating the path toward the Divine, she also does not get to the point of transcending the gender/sex binary altogether. In the light of her work, we

⁴⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annemarie_Schimmel
will dive through the feminine in Islam, considering it a gateway toward transcending gender/sexuality labels altogether.

Schimmel’s writings are critical in bringing forth a nuanced analysis of South Asian poetry and mysticism to the attention of the Western world. Incorporating Schimmel’s work into hers, Carla Petievich’s *When Men Speak as Women: Vocal Masquerade in Indo-Muslim Poetry* is a unique wide-ranging collection of South Asian love lyrics that presents the original verses in Urdu, along with transliteration and translations in English. With their roots synchronously in Islamic and Hindu mysticisms (Sufism and Bhakti devotionalism), these poems speak simultaneously to the sensual and the spiritual, the worldly and the Divine. The book offers a range of lesser known poetry, and covers three main segments of South Asian language and poetic culture: eighteenth-century Punjabi *kafis*, early Deccani Urdu *ghazals*, and nineteenth-century Lucknowi *rekhti ghazals* – (*ghazals* and *kafis* are variations on types of songs). Petievich stresses the importance of the connections between “gender, genre, identity, and literary canon” in feminine narration and its influence on South Asian culture. With its lineage traced from Perso-Arabic, she claims that South Asian lyrics can be read as either devotional or secular narrative allegory. As this thesis will exemplify, the approach is not either-or but both-and. In her discussion of “the feminine and the communalization of literature,” Petievich illuminates that Indo-Muslim poetry “expands and reconfigures our ideas about Indic literature and renders national boundaries as irrelevant as those of caste and

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51 Petievich 23.
community…”\textsuperscript{52} A next step in her argument would be to realize that such lyrics also render gender/sexuality boundaries as irrelevant.

Other relevant works on the topic include Shameem Burney Abbas’ *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India* and William Chittick’s *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi*. Abbas’ book focuses on the critical connections between oral culture and Sufi poetry, highlighting women’s contributions to Sufism and its rituals. While this is a key text for anyone interested in studying the exoteric relationships between Sufi cultural practices, mystical lyrics, and South Asian women’s lives, it does not endeavor to have a philosophical or gendered discussion about the poetry that is included. Chittick (Murata’s husband) has spent his career translating and interpreting innumerable Islamic mystical texts, writing extensively on Rumi and Ibn ‘Arabi. *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi* is an exquisite text studded with dazzling Persian miniature paintings illustrating a collection of his famous poetry, along with a condensed discussion on some of the key themes found throughout Rumi’s work. While Chittick’s writings represent undeniably groundbreaking work in analyzing Islamic mystical philosophy, and his more recent texts (ex: *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World*) allude to the shortcomings of Islamic intellectual thought today, he nonetheless has not attempted to connect some of these philosophical ideas to social issues directly. The next step is to take the works of Chittick and his colleagues and try to bridge the gap between theory and practice, between philosophy and

\textsuperscript{52} Petievich 25.
society, between the exoteric and the esoteric, between “ivory tower” research and on-the-ground realities – in our case, between Islamic thought and gendered social issues.

**Chapter Three Background Literature:**
**Feminist Theory, Islamic Thought and “Third Gender”**

Trinh T. Minh-ha’s book *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* is a revolutionary text in the world of Western feminist theory. It is a critical reflection on bridging the gap between Eastern and Western philosophies, between “first world” and “third world” feminisms, and needless to say, between male and female, masculine and feminine. Minh-ha’s notions of Self/Other, I/i, male/female, masculine/feminine, first world/third world are analogous to the Sufi/perennial concepts of Self/self, Self/Other, and so on. Her philosophical concept of “the Other” or “othering” is crucial in understanding not only women and women-of-color, but is also applicable in our understanding of all those who do not fit into the gender/sex binary, all those we deem as “the Other.” “The Other” is a philosophical concept referring “to that which is other than the initial concept being considered,” often symbolizes a person or entity Other than one’s self; “the Other is identified as “different,” thus the spelling often is capitalized.”

Although Minh-ha’s book is an excellent reflection on the work of feminist scholarship and cultural studies, she never explicitly mentions the concept of liminality, or terms such as “homosexuality” or “third gender.” Nonetheless, her theories question contemporary discourses, question the male-is-norm literary and theoretical established modes of thinking and analysis. The next step is to take the conversation one...

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step further: through Minh-ha’s theory of othering, let us question all absolutist, oppositional modes of thinking, and make a case for neither-here-nor-there annihilations.

Minh-ha is not the only feminist pushing the boundaries of traditional Western feminist theory. Lucy Lippard’s text *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* is a feminist curator’s collection and reflection on artists who occupy liminal spaces in the United States today. Cutting across lines of gender, race, and ethnicity, she presents not only a discussion of multicultural art, but more so an intriguing theoretical perspective on the multi-valent/multi-veilent process of cross-cultural, liminal, artistic work. Of particular relevance to this thesis is her concept of “turning around:” “the simple (and not-so-simple) reversal of an accepted image” 54 – one in which artists who occupy liminal spaces use “irony, humor, and subversion” to hold mirrors up to the dominant culture. 55 This specific concept is not only one Sufis have used time and again to make a point, but it is of particular interest in regards to the discussion of hijra or “third gender” community of South Asia.

Serena Nanda’s *Gender Diversity: Crosscultural Variations* is a short yet profound book on the topic expressed by the title. By presenting examples from seven different cultures across the globe (including South Asian and Euro-American cultures), it makes the case for gender diversity across times and places. While Nanda’s anthropological study challenges our attitudes toward the “natural” or “normal,” it can be further utilized to argue for a more flexible approach to the study of gender/sexuality, one which is beyond dualistic modes of thinking, beyond compartmentalization and rigid

55 Lippard 199.
labeling. Another one of Nanda’s studies *The Hijras of India: Neither Man nor Woman* is a more detailed account of one specific regionally focused ethnographic study. Another similar and richly documented ethnographic study is Gayatri Reddy’s *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. Despite the fact that both Nanda’s and Reddy’s texts profusely provide nuanced anthropological information and cultural context for those who are loosely labeled as “third gender” by the West, they are also both rooted in Western feminist thought. And while both attempt to challenge Western feminism’s notions of compartmentalization by presenting examples from the lives of those who are neither-here-nor-there on the gender/sex binary, the Eastern philosophical or South Asian spiritual notion of non-duality is not brought into account.

Additionally, the most recent research on the topic of Islam and sexuality cannot be ignored in this discussion. Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle’s *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* is a pioneering text that engages scripture, tradition, and law to discuss the issue of homosexuality in Islam. He presents a thorough analysis of Qur’anic verses and questions the authenticity of dubious hadith reports which contribute to the negative attitudes toward the gay/lesbian/transgender in Muslim communities today. While Kugle’s arguments are grounded in traditional Islamic texts and follow the unfolding results into Islamic law and ethics, one can argue that his method suffers from the shortcomings that result from patriarchal ways of knowing (i.e. rational, linguistic, and at times sociological/historical arguments can be considered to fall under patriarchal, hegemonic, Western modes of knowing). Incorporating the oral, feminine tradition of storytelling or the esoteric Sufi
tradition of poetry would have not only strengthened his arguments, but perhaps could have been a more “organic approach,” coming from within rather than from without. Additionally, it seems Kugle, like most Islamic studies academics today, is putting out a fire – i.e., he is responding to the dire need for tolerance and acceptance among those who identify as both Muslims and gay/lesbian/transgender. If academics were fortunate enough to not have to put out such sociological fires, perhaps they would be questioning the gender/sex binary altogether, perhaps they could be using Islamic metaphysical thought to reframe Western feminist/gender theory at a deeper level.
CHAPTER ONE
LIMINALITY IN ISLAMIC TRADITIONAL THOUGHT

The theme of liminality is found throughout Islamic traditional thought, in both the holy book of the Qur’an and in the works of Muslim metaphysical philosophers such as Ibn ‘Arabi. It is critical to begin the discussion with the primary source of knowledge in Islam, as Muslims believe the holy book to be the direct word of God, divine revelation sent to the unlettered Prophet Mohammad through archangel Jibril (Gabriel). Given the historical context of exclusively patriarchal interpretations of the Qur’an, and the recent rise in exclusively exoteric, masculinized, legalistic, readings of the book, it is now more vital than ever to reflect through a feminine/gendered lens on what is turning out to be a text that is playing a far greater role in shaping the 21st century than anyone predicted. The two Islamic concepts of liminal spaces we will focus on in this section are: the concept of Al-A’raf (The Heights) presented in the Qur’an’s seventh chapter by the same name, and the metaphysical concept of barzakh (intermediate state) as theorized by Ibn ‘Arabi and other Muslim polymaths as presented in the works of Murata.

(sub)liminal messages in the Qur’an
The Qur’an is divided into two types of verses: the muhkamat ayat, verses that have clear or one meaning, and the mutashabihat ayat, verses that have many layers of
meanings. The verses we will discuss fall under the latter category, as despite the various translations, commentary, and interpretations, there is no one level of meaning. The dialogue begs for movement beyond superficial readings of such divinely rich prose. The section we will focus on is 7:46-49. Verses 46 and 48 are the only verses in the entire Qur’an that briefly speak of the mysterious “people of the Heights” never to bring them up again.

The majority of chapter seven is spent presenting the oppositional binaries of Good versus Evil, Adam versus Iblis (the Devil), the Companions of the Garden versus the Companions of the Fire. Suddenly, in verse 46, the Qur’an throws a monkey wrench into this neatly divided, dualistic mode of deliberation. Speaking of, on one side, the dwellers of paradise, and on the other side, the dwellers of the hellfire, the Qur’an abruptly exclaims,

Between them shall be a veil, and on the Heights will be men who would know everyone by his marks. They will call out to the companions of the Garden, “Peace [be upon] you:” They will not have entered but they will have an assurance (thereof).

Yusuf Ali’s commentary note on this verse admits that this is a difficult passage that has been interpreted in various ways. He summarizes three schools of thoughts: 1) the men of the Heights are Angels, Prophets, or lofty spiritualists, who know the spiritual worth of souls, and the Heights are their exalted stations; 2) the men on the Heights are souls

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whose fate is yet to be decided as their scale of deeds is evenly balanced between sin and merit, evenly balanced between heaven and hell, but they keep hope alive for God’s Mercy; 3) similar to the first interpretation as higher souls rejoice at the approaching salvation of the righteous, except the partition and the Heights are figurative here, rather than literal heights as in the first case. (Ali himself agrees most with this third line of interpretation.)

Firstly, a more appropriate translation and commentary would be “Men (capital M) of the Heights” rather than simply “men (small m) of the Heights.” As Panikkar so eloquently makes the case for the word Man (capital M),

…not allowing males to usurp the monopoly on Adam…anthropos, homo, Mensch…and split the human race into the dialectical dichotomy of divisive language: male/fe-male, man/wo-man…Furthermore, to substitute “person” for Man will not do for most of the nonwestern cultures, which react negatively to this loaded and artificial word, nor will the expression “human being” convince those cultures that do not have…the western mind…for classifying everything…the expression “human being” denies the uniqueness of every one of us…[an] attitude…contrary to human dignity, for we are not replaceable beings; each one of us is not a means for something else, but an end in himself – and thus nonclassifiable. For this and many other reasons…the word Man stands for that

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unique Being incarnated in any one of us between Heaven and Earth, as the immense majority of human traditions understand the mystery of Man.\textsuperscript{59}

Regardless of which school of thought you opt for among those Yusuf Ali presents, if those on the Heights are lofty spiritualists, then Islamic tradition illustrates repeatedly that women are capable of achieving the same level of spiritual heights and closeness to God as men; if those on the Heights are souls with an even balance, once again, souls are possessed by all human beings, regardless of their worldly gender assignments or affiliations. Whether we are talking about the unique Being between Heaven and Earth, or the unique Being between heaven and hell, the in-between nature is inherent in the mystery of Man. Furthermore, as Professor Rezah Shah Kazemi explains in his lecture “Seeing God Everywhere,” the word “rijaal” or “men” in Qur’anic Arabic refers to men, but not in the gender sense. It is said that on the Day of Judgment, God says, “ya ayuhar rijaal,” “O Men,” and the first to answer is…Maryam (Mary), so rijaal has nothing gender-specific about it. It’s spiritual virility; it’s the one who is going to triumph in this holy battle.\textsuperscript{60}

So the term rijaal in this Heights verse also refers to those souls who possess a certain spiritual virility, therefore can be either men or women or neither.

Having said that, – moving past the superficial linguistic concerns – there are several themes that emerge from the various commentaries and interpretations of this enigmatic verse. The pericope of the Men of the Heights brings together four concepts


\textsuperscript{60} http://vimeo.com/37674062
that complicate the duality of those in the Garden and those of the Fire: ambiguity/veiledness, height/transcendence, gnosis/knowledge, and hope/longing. The first: that which is in-between heaven and hell possesses the nature of a veil. The term used is *hijab*, which here is translated as “veil,” and later in the Qur’an is translated as a “screen.” A veil, by nature, is fluid – flowing fabric. A screen, historically in most parts of the Muslim world, particularly South Asia, has also been fabric, a curtain in most cases, therefore also possessing fluidity. The term in many parts of South Asia for a screen or veil is *purdah*, which as a noun means a curtain, and as a verb means to veil or to make private. A *purdah*, by nature, both reveals and conceals. Traditionally, thin muslins and silks on women’s bodies both revealed and concealed the human form, (as is illustrated for example in innumerable female portraits and paintings from the Mughal era.) Similarly, a screen functioning as a room divider or a door also both revealed and concealed, typically allowing voices to pass through and an outline of the speaker to be visible, yet hiding the true identity and details of the individual. In both cases, the veil serves to create an effect of ambiguity. “God has seventy veils of light and darkness; were He to lift them, the august glories of His face would burn up everyone whose eyesight perceived Him,” reads a famous hadith. (This is arguably an allusion to the Feminine Divine, as veils are a feminized object – a point we will return to later on.) God is deliberately hiding behind multiple veils, (the number 70 being used to indicate

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multiplicity rather than to delineate); He is creating ambiguity, because we cannot face the clear Truth of His Countenance.

Two of the 99 attributes of the Divine in the Islamic tradition are *az-Zahir* and *al-Batin*. *Az-Zahir* is translated as the Outer, the Evident, the Manifest. In Urdu (a language derived partially from Arabic), the word *zahir* means that which is outwardly apparent, that which is obvious. The Urdu phrase “*zahir hay*” is the equivalent of the American English slang “no duh” or “obviously!” The name *al-Batin*, on the other hand, is translated from Arabic as the Hidden, the Unmanifest, the Inner. The opposite of *zahir*, would be that which is kept hidden, secretive, enigmatic, that which is not explicitly expressed, that which cannot be seen with the naked eye, that which is not in-your-face. So these veils, whether it is in-between heaven and hell, or in-between humans and the Divine, serve the purpose of bringing out both of these attributes of the Divine — they hide as much as they show, they cover as much as they uncover, they create intriguing ambiguity, alluring the lover of God to lift the Ultimate Veil.

On one hand, while these Men of the Heights have a veiled, ambiguous status in this liminal space between the Garden and the Fire — whether they are holy Men or Men whose fate is yet to be decided — on the other hand, they are directly being linked to the concept of Heights. If someone is figuratively higher than you, it typically connotes a “better-than” status. A higher position, being above it all, connotes transcendence — to be beyond heaven and hell, or as Rumi’s famous verse goes, the field beyond the ideas of right-doing and wrongdoing. This is an illustration of how liminality serves as a point of

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63 Buchman 44.
transcendence. It is both an “in-between” and transcendent. It points to the idea that one must go through liminality to reach a higher state of Reality.

The word for Heights in Arabic here is *a‘raf*, the root for which is ‘a-r-f. The same root of ‘a-r-f is found in the word for “to know” also used in 7:46 and 48 (*ya‘rifuna*, as in “they know everyone by their marks,”) and is the same root for the term *ma‘rifa*, which means gnosis. Gnosis is special knowledge characteristically pertaining to spiritual truths, and is characterized by immediate and innate recognition — a type of knowledge that the Men of the Heights clearly possess, as they are able to “know everyone by their marks,” (whatever those marks may be, faces or otherwise). Their gnosis allows them to know who the Companions of the Garden are, so they may greet them, and as verse 48 illustrates, it allows them to know the Companions of the Fire, so they may chide them: “The men on the Heights will call to certain men whom they will know from their marks, saying: “Of what profit to you were your hoards and your arrogant ways?"64 Yusuf Ali clarifies in his commentary note that this part of speech is directed toward the Companions of the Fire, reminding them of the futility of their earthly wealth, riches and arrogance.65 The characteristic of gnosis presented here connotes unitive knowledge, one which transcends the binary of being and non-being. Whereas dialectical knowledge is based in rationality and the act of classifying by what the two eyes see, unitive knowledge transcends oppositional and binary modes of thinking.

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65 Yusuf Ali 357, note 1027.
One of the earliest surviving Sufi exegeses on the Qur’an, *Tafsir al-Tustari* gives the following commentary for 7:46 and 47:

And on the Heights are men...He said: The People of the Heights are the people of gnosis (*ma'rifah*). God...said: who know each other by their mark...Their standing is due to the honor...they enjoy in the two abodes and with the inhabitants of both, and the two angels know them. Likewise [God] enabled them to see into...the secrets of His servants and their states in this world.66

In other words, their gnosis, their special wisdom arising from their liminal status, gives them a special place, an honorable standing in both abodes, heaven and hell. Moreover, they have the privilege of calling out to the inhabitants of both sides, precisely because God has blessed them with the extraordinary gift of insight into the secrets of the rest of bifurcated humanity heading to one of the two destinations. And “the two angels know them:” while they themselves possess this secret knowledge, the two angels (presumably at the doors of heaven and hell) possess knowledge about them – another aspect of their liminal reality reiterating their unique, honored status.

While the various interpretations emphasize notions of height, transcendence, gnosis and honor – if these are piously lofty souls such as prophets and the spiritually accomplished – alternatively, the popular interpretation that these are souls whose fate is yet to be decided reiterates ambiguity and draws out the notion of hope. If these are souls whose balance of good and bad deeds is equal, then these Men of the Heights are waiting for God’s verdict, hoping for God’s Mercy, aspiring to get into the Garden. The trope of

hoping and longing is found throughout Islamic mystical tradition – hope being that point of infinity between two finites. It is the point in which you move toward the Absolute, once you have transcended any polarizing binary. It is that tempiternal moment in which you touch God because you have moved past duality.

Two verses in this section re-emphasize this concept of hope-married-with-ambiguity. First, “When their eyes shall be turned toward the Companions of the Fire, they will say: “Our Lord! send us not to the company of the wrongdoers.”67 “Their eyes,” according to Yusuf Ali, can either be interpreted as those whose fate has not yet been decided, (i.e., the Men of the Heights), or it could be those who are about to enter the Garden and happen to catch a glimpse of those dwelling in the Fire. Either way, there is blatant ambiguity as to who is speaking, yet regardless of who is speaking their speech is a hopeful prayer. Second, “Behold! Are these not the men whom you swore that Allah with His Mercy would never bless? Enter ye the Garden: no fear shall be on you, nor shall ye grieve.”68 Yusuf Ali interprets this as being said by the Men on the Heights to the Companions of the Fire in regards to the Companions of the Garden. It is the chiding from verse 48 that is being continued here into 49: a reminder to the inhabitants of the hellfire that their earthly wealth, riches and arrogance were of no use, and those who they thought of as lowly in this world are now being brought into the Garden by virtue of Divine Mercy. In other words, those whom they swore God abhors and would never bless – the downtrodden and the oppressed – are actually those who will now dwell in eternal

67 Yusuf Ali 7:47.
68 Yusuf Ali 7:49
bliss. Once again, there is ambiguity in interpretation. While Yusuf Ali is claiming that this is being said about the Companions of the Garden, another exegesis suggests that perhaps it is being said of the People of the Heights:

They, that is, those men of the Heights, have not entered it, Paradise, although they aspire, to enter it… ‘God causes them to have this aspiration only because He desires to be generous to them…’ ‘While they are in this situation, God appears to them and says ‘Get up and enter Paradise, for I have forgiven you.’69

According to this commentary, Tafsir al-Jalalayn, it is those occupying the liminal space of the Heights that are being guaranteed forgiveness despite (or perhaps due to) their oppressed and lowly status on earth. Once again, we have deliberate ambiguity as to who is speaking and to whom they are speaking. Yet, through all the ambiguity emerges hope. The characteristic of aspiration belonging to the Men on the Heights is not a negative quality, but rather a divinely ordained gift from God.

Hence, on one level, these verses themselves are a zahir expression of that which is batin. They are zahir in so far as they are words on a page, spoken in a particular language, outwardly expressed words from God to Man. They are batin in so far as they are extremely ambiguous as to what these Heights are, who these Men of the Heights are, who is speaking, and to whom. On another level, these Men on the Heights themselves are batin. There is ambiguity as to who they are, whether Prophets or saints or spiritualists or souls whose fate is yet to be decided. At the same time, if they are souls

whose fate is yet to be decided, then there is ambiguity as to what entails their fate, whether they will end up in heaven or hell, hoping for God’s Mercy.

The passage itself is filled with intersecting ambiguities – uncertainties with regard to the identity of the Men of the Heights and their ultimate fate, told through a dialogue whose speakers and addressees are ambiguous and could be multiple. But all of this ambiguity points to a potentially radical conclusion: the relation of liminality with transcendence between two sides of a binary is an indescribable space. This indescribable space is the point of transcendence and ascension to heights, heights that bring us closer to the Throne of the Beloved.

In a sense, the verses themselves occupy a liminal, ambiguous state in the Qur’an. They are neither completely *zahir*, nor completely *batin*. They outwardly express a few words hinting at the secrets of liminal spaces in the hidden Unseen world. Yet there is a universe of knowledge that is kept from us, leaving us longing for more – just as those on the Heights are left in a liminal space longing for the love of the Beloved. In summary, whether we are discussing the verses themselves, or those who are on the Heights, reading the Qur’an’s (sub)liminal messages reiterates several key characteristics of liminality: ambiguity/veiledness, height/transcendence, gnosis/knowledge, and hope/aspiration/longing.

**heart as barzakh, soul as barzakh, human reality as barzakh**

In Murata’s volume, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought*, she presents an in-depth gendered analysis of the works of Ibn ‘Arabi, interwoven with the works of other prominent Sufi masters from the libraries of Islamic
spiritual thought. Of particular interest to the topic of liminality is Ibn ‘Arabi’s concept of “Barzakh” or “intermediate world.”70 In Islamic traditional thought, barzakh commonly refers to that intermediate state, or liminal space, where the soul resides after death until the Day of Judgment – a state of self-review in the grave. This seems to be an exoteric or superficial reading of a spiritually rich notion, an outward interpretation of a concept with profound inward potential – in realms beyond religio-spirituality. Ibn ‘Arabi takes this understanding of barzakh and gives it the “tempiternal” treatment.

The contemporary religious studies intellectual and perennial philosopher, Raimon Panikkar, describes tempiternal moments as those “which are not outside time but are not stifled by it either.”71 In other words, tempiternity is the concept of time that is beyond the duality of “now and later.” Rather than setting up the dualism of temporal now versus eternal later, or human-time versus God’s-time, tempiternity connotes the eternal nature of each and every lived moment, truly lived moment. “Reality is not exhausted in temporality. It is not temporal now, and then eternal later, but rather tempiternal, all in one.”72 Not satisfied by the definition of barzakh as an exclusively eschatological, post-physical-death experience, Ibn ‘Arabi and his mystical cohorts dare to open doors to a world of richer reflections and deeper understandings, (re)creating the concept of barzakh through a very tempiternal fashion. They dare to ask what the concept of barzakh might mean in the here-and-now, and what it means for the human condition, the human reality. In the spirit of the mystical tradition, they dive in swimming to ever

71 Panikkar 116.
72 http://www.raimon-panikkar.org/english/gloss-tempiternity.html
deeper depths rather than attempting to walk-on-water, merely treading the surface of an ocean of meanings.

Murata illuminates the concept of barzakh via various metaphysical, metaphorical illustrations, some of the central ones being, heart as barzakh, nafs (soul) as barzakh, and human reality as barzakh. Needless to say, these are not all mutually exclusive concepts, yet they are unique enough for each to shed a slightly different light on the matter at hand. Beginning with the barzakh as heart, or the human heart as barzakh, Murata quotes Kashani whose theories reflect those of Ibn ‘Arabi:

…the form of the heart was born. Like an isthmus [barzakh], it became the intermediary between the sea of the spirit and the sea of the soul. It stood at their meeting place. Thereby if in their flowing either should infringe upon or transgress against the other, it could prevent that: “[He let flow the two seas that meet together,] between them an isthmus they do not overpass” [55:19-20].

The last line is the Quranic verse that at first sight refers to the natural phenomenon of sea water and fresh water, “the two bodies of water, salt and sweet, meet together, yet keep separate, as if there was a barrier or partition between them.” According to Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s exegesis of this verse, this is another of those Divine favors, a grave blessing, without which the human being would not survive. The heart, here directly compared to an isthmus, a barzakh, connotes its intermediary, middle-world, neither-here-nor-there status. It is a meeting place. An invisible meeting place, like the

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74 Yusuf Ali 1399.
invisible barrier between the two bodies of water. Yet, there is an outright characteristic of irony here: a barrier by definition tends to be something solid, something concrete, especially if it is to separate liquid. Yet here, the heart is allowing, the barrier is allowing, not preventing, the flowing of the two bodies of water. It is preventing insofar as infringements are concerned, it is preventing insofar as transgressions are concerned, as God reminds us over and over in the Quran, We love those not who transgress.\textsuperscript{75} Transgress against whom? Transgress against what? That is also answered very clearly and repeatedly, that it is not God whom you hurt with your transgressions, rather your own soul, your own heart, your own self.\textsuperscript{76}

If the two bodies of water – whether it is the metaphysical sea of the spirit and sea of the soul, or the natural phenomenon of fresh water and salt water – represent all dualities, or dualistic modes of thinking, in a gender-sexuality context, they represent the binary of male and female, masculine-feminine, homosexual-heterosexual. Moreover, the heart, that which lies in the middle, represents not that which simply erases differences, but on the contrary, that which allows for the unique aspects of each side to express their individualities, to fulfill their roles. Minh-ha writes in *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*,

Imagine a world of *yang* and *yang* instead of *yin* (the female principle) and *yang* (the male principle)…No conflict exists…except when the pair are thought of as opposite to each other (instead of different from each other)…Thus, being and

\textsuperscript{76} Yusuf Ali 2:231.
nonbeing have come to fear each other and act in mutual exclusiveness instead of mutual generation and support.\textsuperscript{77}

In other words, it is not duality in and of itself that is problematic; it is not even difference that is the root crisis here. Rather the problem is the setting up of opposites, oppositions, oppositional positions. Given the rising trend of erasing differences (e.g., globalization, unisex behavioral patterns,\textsuperscript{78} etc.), we increasingly observe the rise of \textit{yang} and \textit{yang} – or \textit{yin} and \textit{yin} for that matter. Gendered human rights violations are the aggressions and transgressions that result from being and nonbeing, male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, fearing each other and acting in mutual exclusiveness, rather than mutual generation and support. Consequently, what is damaged in this duel between the dualities is that which lies in liminality, the human heart; whose human dignity is violated are those who lie in liminality. Those who fit in neither fresh water, nor salt water, neither male, nor female, neither masculine, nor feminine, neither heterosexual, nor homosexual. Learning from the ocean in the natural world, or the heart in the metaphysical world, it behooves us to embrace our uniqueness, our individuality \textit{through} that which or those who lie in liminality, it behooves us to transcend the duality, rather than tear down the middle, tear down our hearts, tear down differences, and thereby transgress. “Verily, We love not the transgressors.”\textsuperscript{79}

Murata continues the translation and explication of Kashani’s concept of the heart as \textit{barzakh}:

\textsuperscript{77} Trinh T. Minh-ha, \textit{Woman, Native, Other} (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989) 67.
\textsuperscript{78} Minh-ha 116.
\textsuperscript{79} See footnote 75.
[the heart’s] existence subsists through love, and love’s existence through it. In human existence, the heart is like the Throne of the All-merciful. The Throne is the great heart in the macrocosm, and the heart is the small throne in the microcosm. All hearts are encompassed by the Throne…

Given that the heart represents that which is in the middle, that which is neither-here-nor-there, that which is liminal or those who occupy liminality, it is safe to say that it is in fact liminality’s existence that subsists through love, and love’s existence through liminality. One of the 99 names of God, or attributes of the Divine in the Islamic tradition, is *al-Wadud*, translated as the Most Loving, or the Source of all love. The Arabic root of *Wadud* is *w-d-d* forming the Quranic term *mawaddah*, which is commonly translated as “affection.” Hence, additional translations of al-Wadud include, the One deserving of all affection, the One who is the source of all loving-kindness, the One who loves, the One Love, the Beloved. The root *w-d-d* in Arabic also connotes “to long for, to desire, to wish for.” The human heart is the seat of longing, desiring, and wishing in the microcosm; the *barzakh* of the grave is the seat of longing in the liminality of the mesocosm, desiring, wishing to be in Paradise or meet with the Divine on the Day of Judgment; the Throne of the All-Merciful is the Seat of Ultimate Longing (as the Islamic tradition goes, God created us because He/She had a Desire to be known) so it is the Ultimate, All-Encompassing, All-Comprehensive *Barzakh* in the macrocosm. The

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80 Murata 310.
81 www.corpus.quran.com
82 http://wahiddudin.net/words/99_pages/wadud_47.htm
83 Murata 36, 189-190, 198, 199.
Greater Heart, al-Wadud, encompasses all the particular hearts, the Greater Barzakh encompasses all the particular barzakhs, the Greater Liminality embraces all minor worldly liminalities.

Then, is it so blasphemous to say, God is the Ultimate Trans-gender. Clearly, I am not implying God went through a sex-change operation or that He/She partakes in drag queen contests on the weekends, but more so that He/She is Beyond Gender, Beyond Sexuality, Beyond Desire. Moreover, it is precisely pushing beyond our genders, beyond our sexualities, beyond our desires, beyond our individualities, beyond the individual bodies of water, through our hearts, through our liminalities, that we may better get to know Him/Her, that we may dive toward the Divine.

Diving toward the Divine, we find not only the (meta)physical heart as barzakh, but the dimension of the soul or nafs as barzakh. In the traditional sense, the barzakh is the place, or state in the grave where one goes through a self-review, a self-examination of one’s life, a sort of report card or self-audit if you will. It is a time for accounting for one’s deeds and intentions, one’s life savings – or spending, as the Quran states explicitly that one will be questioned in the grave about that which they indulged in, in this life. A well-known Muslim tradition proclaims, judge yourself before you are brought to judgment, or take account of yourself before you are brought to account. As discussed earlier, this is precisely that tempiternal treatment which Panikkar, Murata, Ibn ʿArabi and other masters of the esoteric sphere, across traditions and throughout time have called

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85 http://www.islaam.net/main/display.php?id=905&category=143
for – to break through the dualities of now versus later, this life versus that life, on-the-ground versus in-the-grave, and treat the here-and-now as though you are already standing in front of God, as though you are already present in Divine Presence.

This breakthrough is only possible by illuminating a more nuanced understanding of the word nafs. Murata states that the word *nafs* may be translated as “soul” or “self.”

She goes on to elucidate that the tripartite division of “body, soul, and spirit” are reflections of God’s qualities, they like all created things are signs of God.

Through [this tripartite division] we come to understand that the movement from outward to inward involves an increasing intensity of ontological qualities. The trajectory of increase leads ultimately to infinite and absolute Being. …[the] soul commonly acts as a kind of *barzakh* (isthmus) between spirit and body… The soul possesses the qualities of both sides and acts as the intermediary between the two. If the spirit is light and the body clay, the soul is fire. It is a mixture of light and clay, both one and multiple at the same time. It is subtle and luminous enough to establish a link with the spirit, but dense and dark enough to maintain contact with the body.

This movement from outward to inward involving ontological intensity is the movement symbolized in the dance of the whirling dervishes. In the Mevlevi Order (followers of Rumi) the spiritualists spin counterclockwise in their trance reaching for states of ecstasy. The horizontal circling is an attempt at tempiternity, attempt at finding the eternity in the

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86 Murata 236.
87 Murata 237.
88 Murata 237.
now; its counterclockwise character symbolizes many profundities, one of which is undoing, the undoing of temporal movement, engendering a sense of timelessness. This concept of movement is a key characteristic of the soul, *nafs*, self. Without movement, there is no spiral trajectory leading to the ultimate Being. By being the *barzakh* between spirit and body, by possessing qualities of both sides, thereby acting as an active intermediary, the *nafs* epitomizes movement, movement intensifying ontological qualities, movement toward the Divine.

In other words, in addition to longing and desiring, movement is also a key characteristic of *barzakh*, a key characteristic of liminal spaces in Islamic spiritual psychology. Earlier, we discussed the dualities of fresh water and salt water, the sea of the spirit and the sea of the soul. Here now, we dive into the sea of the soul, the sea of the *nafs*, and find another ocean of dualities. The dualities being presented are spirit and body, light and clay, one and multiple, subtlety and density, luminosity and darkness. Once again, dualistic modes of thinking are being challenged via these metaphysical philosophies. Whereas the symbolism of the heart, the symbolism of the ocean barrier, taught us its unique characteristic of allowing for and expressing differences and individualities without oppositional compartmentalization, the symbolism of the *nafs* is teaching us, among other meanings, the crucial concept of movement.

“\text{I think men are programmed. There is no movement with them. \text{ They’re static…Men aren’t prepared to change like women.}}’ \text{ And they will not let their communities shift either,}’\text{ writes Cynthia Cockburn, a feminist researcher on gender in}
conflict regions, quoting an interviewee.\textsuperscript{89} I would reframe her argument to say, it is not necessarily men, but patriarchal, masculinized ways of thinking that do not allow for movement. It is static. This rigidity, this fixedness is characteristic of what Cynthia Enloe, another contemporary feminist writer, refers to as “masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope.”\textsuperscript{90} Enloe claims that it is this masculinized memory/humiliation/hope which perpetrates militarized cultures. While her work focuses on history and the politics of war, her theories are valuable to our thesis here. The pretense that there is no movement and the stubborn attachment to static modes of thinking are both the cause and result of masculinized modes of thinking. Exoteric, masculinized hopes, memories and humiliations are not prepared to change like esoteric, feminized hopes, memories, and humiliations. It is precisely these masculinized ways of thinking that prevent the movement of thought past the exoteric, prevents us from realizing the creative potential of movement, from realizing that those who are buried deep within layers upon layers of liminalities possess increasingly intensified ontological qualities compared to those of us that are shallow yet.

Since all of us at some level move within liminality, human reality itself becomes a \textit{barzakh}. Murata quotes Jandi’s work,

This one, all-comprehensive Reality demands the \textit{barzakh}-reality that brings together… manifestation and nonmanifestation, activity and reception of activity…She [the \textit{barzakh}-reality] brings together these two while keeping them

\textsuperscript{90} Cynthia Enloe, \textit{Bananas, Beaches, and Bases} (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990) 44.
separate...Hence the all-comprehensive barzakh is active between two things that receive activity, like the masculine gender between two feminines.\textsuperscript{91}

This masculine-between-two-feminines alludes to the hadith of Prophet Muhammad which says, “Three things of this world of yours were made loveable to me: women, perfume – and the coolness of my eye was placed in the ritual prayer.”\textsuperscript{92} Without getting into the ramifications of Murata’s argument based on the symbolism of grammatical gender (i.e., ritual prayer, \textit{salat}, is grammatically gendered feminine) let us reflect on the themes we have expounded on thus far. Once again, we find the trope of activeness and activity, movement. Once again, we find the trope of the in-between, liminality. Once again, we find the trope of bringing-together-while-keeping-separate. It is as though the human reality or barzakh-reality brings together the heart and the \textit{nafs}, it brings together characteristics of the heart (i.e., like the ocean barrier, it keeps the sea of the soul and the sea of the spirit together yet separate) and characteristics of the \textit{nafs} (i.e., movement, disciplined movement, calm within chaos). Just as the gendered/sexualized-reality brings together on one level, the heart and the \textit{nafs}, on another level, the male and the female, or the masculine and the feminine, or the heterosexual and the homosexual, possessing characteristics of both sides, and more – rather than an “either-or” approach, it calls for a “both-and” attitude.

In summary, Murata uses the philosophies of esoteric scholars and mystical masters to journey beyond the exoteric, superficial understanding of the concept of \textit{barzakh}. The three main metaphysical metaphors pertinent to gender binaries in Islamic

\textsuperscript{91} Murata 198-199.
\textsuperscript{92} Murata 183.
thought discussed here are, the heart as *barzakh*, the soul as *barzakh*, and the human *barzakh*-reality. From these, we have learned that our life, human reality, in and of itself is a liminal space, which involves starting off in separation, moving *through* the differences, toward the all-comprehensive Reality. These discussions (re)open a world of Islamic gender theory waiting to be discovered. It pushes us past oppositional dualistic modes of thinking, past exoteric, masculinized, patriarchal analyses, allowing for liminalities, allowing for all those liminalities which comprise the human-reality, that *barzakh*-reality, including gender/sex realities and liminalities, allowing room to breathe.
CHAPTER TWO
GENDERED LIMINALITY IN
SOUTH ASIAN ISLAMIC MYSTICAL THOUGHT

With suggestive antecedents in Islamic traditional thought, the concept of
liminality blossoms via the lyrical poetry of the Islamic mystical tradition. In South Asian
Sufi poetry, liminality and liminal spaces are explored, often as regards to gender and
gender binaries. For example, notions of the Divine Feminine and love of God are
poetically explored in ways that play on stereotypical male-female gender roles. The first
section of this chapter will focus on the concept of heights and veiling-unveiling as
presented in well-known South Asian Sufi poetry and consider it in relation to the
Qur’anic verses (7:46-49) and hadith reports discussed earlier. The second section of this
chapter will focus on the concept of non-duality as presented in the well-known works of
Mevlana Jalal-uddin Rumi and Baba Bulleh Shah and examine its connection with the
metaphysical *barzakh* of Ibn ‘Arabi. Through the connections explored in this chapter, a
clearer vision of gendered liminality emerges from within Islamic thought.

**Hopes, Heights, Divine Veiling-Unveiling**

The trope of the heights is found throughout South Asian Sufi poetry. One of the
most celebrated traditional Sufi songs passed down from generation to generation is
called “Peera” (“O Mystical Guide.”) A modern rendition of this Sufi folk song is done
by two young Pakistani artists, Qurat-ul-Ain Balouch and Khawar Jawad, and the verses directly pertaining to the notion of heights are sung as the following:

*Layee mein ucheyaan naal yari veh*

Oh I have made friends with those of the heights

*Main haan nivaan, Saeen mera ucha eh…*

I am abased, my Teacher/Lover is higher

*Ve mein Peer manawan challi aan*

O I am off to reconcile with my spiritual Guide

*Mere hath katora eh maangaan da…*

In my hand is a bowl of aspirations93

There are two key terms in the first line that are pertinent to our discussion: “ucheyaan” and “yaari.” “Ucha” in Punjabi or “ooncha” in Urdu means high or above. *Ucheyaan* is relating in one word (that which takes several words in English), “those of the heights” or “those that are higher than me” or “those who are above me,” in other words, People of the Heights. On one level, it is referring to those that are spiritually higher than the self (ex: prophets, saints, spiritually-realized). On another level, it is referring to the One who occupies the Ultimate Height, the One who is the Highest, the Divine. The word “yaari” means friendship but it is more nuanced than that, especially when used in South Asian mystical/folk poetry. Depending on the context, the word *yaari* can refer to a platonic friendship, or it may mean a romantic relationship, as the word *yaar* can mean friend, lover, or in mystical poetry, the Beloved. “*Layee mein ucheyaan naal yari veh:*” I have

fashioned friendships with those on the Heights, I have befriended those who are higher/better than me.

This sentiment of feeling lower, feeling abased, leads to the next verse “mein ha nivaan, Saeen mera ucha eh,” “I am lower, my Saeen is higher [yet].” Saeen also means the beloved, but where the word yaar can be used in laymen terms to connote even such relationships as boyfriend-girlfriend, the word saeen more directly connotes a spiritual hierarchy and a relationship of respect such as teacher-student. Saeen is more of an honorary title. For example, in Sindhi, a child may call baba saeen (dearly beloved dad) to address their father, or in a school setting students may refer to the teacher as saeen master (o honorable teacher/master). Moreover, spiritual guides or mystics at Sufi shrines are referred to as peer saeen, (the honorable spiritual teacher), and when speaking of God, people from Sindh may say “Allah Saeen.” Allah Saeen cannot be simply translated as God Almighty, but it connotes more of a familiarity and closeness to the Divine, a term of endearment which takes into account a relationship based on respect and love intertwined – it stresses God’s attributes of love and forgiveness more so than those of fear and punishment. So again, on one level, the verse is saying, I am lower and my worldly spiritual guide is higher, on another level, it is humbly confessing, I am lower and my Friend/Lover/Guide/Teacher/Beloved (i.e.: God or the Divine) is higher. The two levels of connotation are the earthly and the Divine.

Precisely because I am lower, I must approach my beloved/friend. Think of contemporary stereotypical Western marriages, in which it is said that normally one person has the upper hand and the other a lower hand. For example, if there is a fight,
usually it is the same person who apologizes regardless of whose fault it is. This word “manawan” from the impression “manawna” means to make-up, typically connoting that a fight or separation has taken place. “Mein peer manawan chali aan:” I am off to make-up with my Peer, I am off to woo my beloved, implying, I am on my way to meet my Beloved and ask for forgiveness (regardless of whether I have committed a wrong or not). Again, given the many layers of meanings, the Peer could be a friend, lover, and/or the Beloved.

And when you are on your way to woo the beloved, or to end a separation, what is it you harbor on the journey: hopes and aspirations – hoping he/she will forgive you, will make up with you, will befriend you, will love you back. The word “maangaan” is plural for “maang,” which as a noun means wish or desire, and as a verb means to ask, to beg, or to request. In other words, “mere hath katora eh maangaan da:” in my hands is a bowl of wishes, desires, and aspirations, or a slight variation of “maangaan” to “mangan” would add another layer of depth to the verse by changing it to, “in my hand is a begging bowl.” Once again, the concept of hopes and aspirations is being highlighted here and it is within the context of the trope of people of the heights. What is different here though is that the poet is describing those that are lower as having hopes and aspirations as they go toward their lovers/teachers/Beloved on the heights, (rather than those on the Heights having aspirations). Perhaps the poet is employing irony: whereas the Qur’an spoke of those on the Heights as having aspirations of getting into the Garden, the poet speaks of those that are lower (in spiritual stature) of going with hopes of wooing or making-up with those on the heights. Or perhaps given the alternative reading we discussed earlier,
the poet is reiterating the high status of those who have attained the Heights the rest of us can only aspire to achieve.

A salient point that cannot be ignored is the blatant-yet-subtle gendered aspect of such poetry and tropes. Starting with the most obvious expression, that of the language being employed. For example, the poet switches back and forth between male and female nouns and verbs when referring to the self. “Mein haan nivaan,” “I am lower” is speaking in a male voice; if it were a female voice, it would have been “mein haan nivi.” Then the singer goes on to use the female voice in “mein peer manawan chali aan,” “I am off to make up with my beloved/teacher;” if it were a male voice, it would have been “mein peer manawan chala aan.” Carla Petievich attempts to explain this phenomenon in her book When Men Speak as Women: Vocal Masquerade in Indo-Muslim Poetry. She elucidates that the majority of Punjabi Sufi poetry is narrated from the point of the view of the feminine, the Everywoman, regardless of the gender of the poet being male or female, creating a vocal masquerade.94 She also reiterates the popularly understood notion that many Sufi saints throughout time referred to themselves poetically as the “bride” of their spiritual guide, or of God, regardless of the gender of the spiritual follower.95

Just as there is a back-and-forth in the gendered language, there is also a back-and-forth in the gender roles; there is not only a play on language, but a play on gender hierarchies. Just as the poet is making us question if it is a male or female narrating, they are also making us question who has the upper hand in this relationship. As a case in

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95 Petievich 41.
point, the title of *saeen* in contemporary Sindhi culture is commonly used by the wife to refer to her husband. The poets take this concept of traditional gender roles and turn it on its head. If taken at face value, the above verses at one point are implying a male-male relationship, in which the male spiritual guide is higher, and the male spiritual follower is lower; at another point, they are implying a male-female relationship, in which the female follower is off to woo her male beloved or teacher.

Even the concept of being a “bride” is completely reversed or inverted. For example, in Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan’s “*Tum ek Gorakh Dhandha ho*” (You are a Mystery), which we will return to later in the chapter, the poet is asking the Divine to lift Her veil, speaking as though a groom would to his bride on the wedding night, or a male lover would be to his beloved. Whereas in much of Punjabi Sufi poetry it is the human that is the bride of God. Perhaps a third eye, or a view from the heights, shows us that it is not so clear who is the bride of whom – or who has the upper hand, the student or the teacher, the spiritual guide or the follower, the bride or the groom, the lover or the beloved. What is clear, though, is that there is a deliberate play on traditional gender roles to get the point across: the point being precisely that passionate love upsets traditional gender hierarchies. Rather than following gender norms, love shatters, destabilizes, subverts, conventional gender power dynamics.

Throughout history until recent times, particularly in South Asia, the bride and groom did not see each other until after marriage. When marriages were strictly arranged by families and those other than the bride and groom, the first time they caught a glimpse of each other was more likely than not on their wedding night. This imagery of a bride on
her wedding night leads to the symbolism of the veil. Whether it is the bride who lifts her veil to show her face to the groom, or the groom who lifts the veil off of the bride’s face, in either case, they are each seeing the lover/beloved for the first time. Moreover, in order for there to be union, communion, consummation, the veil must first be lifted. In order for the two sides, male and female, bride and groom, lover and beloved to come together, in order for there to be an erasure of the duality, in order to transcend the binary, the veil must be lifted. Just as the People of the Heights occupy the veil between heaven and hell, they are above both the evil-doers and the do-gooders, they transcend the Fire and the Garden – they are the Veil (or 70 veils of light) that is between Man and the Divine, between Self and Other.

This symbolism of the veil and the trope of divine veiling-and-unveiling are found throughout South Asian Sufi poetry as well. It is almost never discussed without first complaining (to God) about the seemingly dichotomous state of affairs: the oppositional binary that exists throughout not only His/Her creations, but His/Her own contradictory nature and attributes (i.e., Zahir/Batin). Once the poet decries this duality, he/she goes on to beg the Beloved to lift His/Her veil so that the lover may gain a mere glimpse of Divine Beauty – hoping for (comm)Union.

In his renowned mystical song, “Tum ek gorakh dhandha ho” (attributed to contemporary Pakistani poet Naaz Khialvi) Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan croons a long litany of complaints to God. Most of the verses protest the dichotomous, seemingly contradictory nature of God’s attributes (i.e.: manifest versus non-manifest). After almost every couplet or stanza, the poet reiterates “Tum ek Gorakh Dhandha ho” (commonly translated as
“You are a Mystery.”) *Tum* means “you,” *ek* means “one,” and *ho* means “are.” *Gorakh Dhandha* has been translated as “puzzle,” “enigma,” “paradox,” “mystery,” or “incomprehensible,” but a very basic, perhaps literal, translation would be “shady business,” “mysterious matter,” or “baffling affair.” That is to say, the title phrase is better translated as “You are One Mysterious Affair” or “You are One Shady Business.”

The poem, in keeping with the spirit of paradox, is praising God *through* a litany of complaints against/to/for/about God -- the chief complaint being that He/She is a Mystery, a Paradox, an Enigma, a Dichotomy, a Contradiction, an Ambiguous Affair.

*Ho bhi nahi aur her jaa ho*

You are naught and yet you are everywhere

*Tum ek Gorakh Dhandha ho...*

You are One Shady Business

*Pata yoon to bata daitay ho sub ko la-makaan apna*

You go ahead and tell everyone your whereabouts as the Placeless

*Ta’ajub hai magar rehtay ho tum tootay huay dil mein*

But it is a wonder how you [manage to] reside in a broken heart

*Tum ek gorakh dhandha ho*

You are One Shady Business

*Chuptay nahi ho, samnay aatay nahi ho tum*

You do not hide, You do not show Yourself [either]

*Jalwa dikha ke jalwa dikhatay nahi ho tum...*

You show your Manifestation [yet] You do not even show a glimpse of Yourself
Hairan hoon mairay dil mein sama’ay ho kiss tarah
I’m amazed at how You are dwelling in my heart

Haan’la key do jahan mein samatay nahi ho tum...
Whereas the two worlds cannot contain You

Tum ek gorakh dhandha ho...
You are One Shady Business

Yeh burai, wo bhalai, yeh jahanum, wo bahisht
This sin, that virtue, this hell, that heaven

Is ulat phair mein farmao to kiya rakha hai...
Pray tell what is to be found in all this backward-circling

Apni pehchaan ki khaatir hai banaya sub ko
For Your own recognition You created everyone

Sab ki nazron se magar khud ko chupa rakha hai
Yet You keep (your)self hidden from everyone’s sight

Tum ek gorakh dhandha ho...
You are One Shady Business

Khoon rulata hai yeh taqseem ka andaaz mujhay...
It makes me cry tears of blood, this style of dividing… 96

These are merely a few verses from a very long poem. These particular lines are showcased here because they highlight the poet’s complaints to God about God, about the contradictory nature of God. The poet is bemoaning this dichotomy of manifestation and

non-manifestation, *Zahir* and *Batin*: you are nowhere and yet you are everywhere, you do not hide yourself and yet you do not show yourself either, you tease me with your signs and yet I cannot seem to catch even a glimpse of you, you created everyone simply for your own acknowledgment, yet how am I supposed to recognize you if you keep yourself hidden from sight. The line “For your own recognition You created everyone” alludes to the Sufi hadith in which God divulges, “I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known; so I created the creatures and made Myself known to them; so they knew Me.”

In discussing the contradictions pertaining to God’s “size” and “location,” the poet bewilderingly points out: on one hand, you claim to be the Placeless, on the other hand, you somehow manage to live in a broken heart; on one hand, the Two Worlds (i.e., the Earth and the Heavens, or this life and the afterlife) cannot contain you, on the other hand, you somehow fit into my heart. This is a reference to the famous Sufi hadith in which God reveals, “neither My heaven nor My earth can contain me, but the heart of My believing servant can contain me.”

Whereas Ibn ‘Arabi proposed the idea of heart-as-*barzakh*, soul-as-*barzakh*, or human reality-as-*barzakh*, here we find that the liminality is not only occupied by humans, but God Himself occupies the Ultimate Liminality – at least our understanding of God can be nothing but an ambiguity, a mystery, a contradiction. At least in relation to human beings – i.e.: it is not that God as such is “liminal” but given our own duality, he appears to us as nothing but; a single being appears as separate images in a divided mirror.

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97 [http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/addas1.html](http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/addas1.html)
98 [http://www.allaahuakbar.net/ahaadeeth/10.htm](http://www.allaahuakbar.net/ahaadeeth/10.htm)
The poet goes on to express, as a reflection of God’s seemingly contradictory nature, that He created that which is also seemingly contradictory and dichotomous: good and bad, evil and virtue, heaven and hell, and by extension, one can argue, male and female, and all other dichotomies or seemingly oppositional binaries. All of this leads the poet to ask, what is to be found in this *ulat pher*, or what is the purpose of all of this backward-twirling, all of this counter-clockwise whirling, all of this turning-around. This is only one verse out of a whole slew of verses which points to the dualistic and dichotomous nature of both God and His/Her creations. All of these divisions, these separations, these binaries, lead Man to bleed tears.

The cause of crying blood is, on one level, the separation, the dichotomy, the division, the contradiction; on another level, it is the Veil – a veil that is enough to give you a glimpse without really giving you a true glimpse of the Other, the Beloved. The veiledness only intensifies the longing by holding both presence and absence together in a single liminal space. The seventy veils of light are veils that keep you apart, the multitude of veils that get in the way, keep you away, preventing union. The verses pertaining directly to veiling are as follows:

*Jab bajuz tairay doosra koi maujood nahi*
When without You, there is no other present

*Phir samajh mein nahi aata tera purdah karna*
Then [I] do not understand this veiling of Yours

*Aap hi apna purdah ho*
You are Your Own Veil
Tum ek gorakh dhanda ho
You are One Shady Business

Daikhnay wala tujhay kya dekhta
What was the beholder supposed to see of you

Tu ne her rang say purdah kiya
You have used every color to veil Yourself

Tum ho qonein ka haasil-e-aarzoo
You are the two worlds’ gain-of-longing

Aankh nay kar liya aansu’on say wuzu
The eye is done performing ablution with tears

Ub to kardo ata deed ka ik sabu
Now would you [please] bestow a flask of Your appearance

Aao parday say tum aankh key ruh-baruh
Come out from [behind] the veil to in front of the eye

Chund lamhay Milan, do ghari guftugu
[For] a few moments of Union, two minutes of conversation

This request for unveiling comes toward the end of the song. Only after going through and listing the dualities, issuing a litany of complaints in regards to the contradictions, does the request for unveiling appear. The poet lyrically works his way through the dualities to get beyond them, to transcend them, and then finally request unveiling of the liminal veil so that there may be Union.

In regards to the veil, the mystics complain: if there is no god but God, if You are in everything and everywhere, if I as a human have no value of my own since I am so utterly dependent on you, then I do not understand what is the point of You veiling Yourself. “You are Your Own Veil,” meaning, Your own Nature is one of Veiled-ness, one of mystery, one of intrigue. Again, this is a blatant “jab” at God’s liminality and ambiguity, which is in and of itself (perceived as) a dichotomy and contradictory, and then as a result, creates in His/Her own reflection that which is also dichotomous and contradictory.

“Tu ne har rang se purdah kiya” has a double meaning. It can be translated as “You have veiled/hidden Yourself from every color,” or “You have used every color to veil Yourself.” These shades of colors, or the 70 veils of light, represent the diversity of His/Her creations, despite their seemingly contradictory nature. Earlier, the mystic had complained that You do not fit into both Worlds combined yet You somehow occupy a broken heart, here, he’s stating, “You are the two Worlds’ gain-of-longing” – whether this life and the hereafter, or this Earth and the Heavens, both worlds long to be with You. In other words, all dualities end in the Divine. Once the veil has been lifted, the lover and the beloved become One. Earlier, where the mystic had harshly complained about crying tears of blood due to the Divine’s divisive *modus operandi*, here you see a softer lament: I have cried so much that I ended up with ablution from my tears. (Traditionally, Muslims do *wuzu*, a ritual ablution with water, before their five daily prayers.) The Sufis are taking this concept of ablution to a deeper/higher level: I have cried so much that my tears have cleansed my body, now would You please bless me
with a mere glimpse of your Beauty, come out from hiding behind the veil and grant me a few moments of Union, a few moments of conversation between lovers? Another reading could be that the tears are the ablution of the eye, preparing the eye for a glimpse of the lover, purifying it for the Divine Vision. Just as an individual performs ablution to prepare the body for an “exoteric” encounter (the five formal prayers), here the tears are performing an ablution of the inner eye preparing one for an esoteric encounter with the Divine.

Whereas in the Qur’anic Heights verse, the Veil was between the binary of the Garden and the Fire, here the Veil is between the binary of the bride and groom, or lover and the beloved. In either case, it represents the liminality which one must go through in order to become One with the Beloved, One with the Divine. What we do see here is an example of how feminine imagery is being used to, on one level, point to the Divine Feminine, on another level, is being used to transcend all gender/sexual binaries. On one level, the veil is typically a feminine symbol, or feminine article of clothing, so begging the Bride to lift her veil is clearly alluding to the Divine as a female. If you go one layer deeper, you realize that a feminine symbol is being utilized to subvert the setting-up of dualities, being utilized to transcend the binary, whether lover/beloved, male/female, student/teacher. Once again, the roles on both sides of the binary are muddled, and eventually overcome as the two become One. The purpose behind such imagery is to offer the audience a readily comprehensible and rich metaphor, given the traditional gender roles in the particular cultural and historical context; such symbolism imparts profound philosophical concepts via simple, comprehensible language. The purpose is
not to take the eroticism of veiling/unveiling literally, but on the contrary, to use it to describe that indescribable set of feelings one feels for the Divine – “to see yourself in the poetry,” as Rumi scholar Omid Safi stated in a recent talk titled “Love is the GPS of Divine Secrets.”

To truly see yourself in the poetry means to truly see your Self in the poetry – to transcend the binary, to rupture through the duality, to lift the veil, to attain the Heights.

**neither-here-nor-there**

In the dialogue of liminality, the dialogue of non-duality, two particular Sufi poems stand out with intense lucidity – perhaps it is one poem with two versions, each version having numerous renditions. As with most Sufi lyric poetry, it has no title, but if I had to give it one, it would be called “neither-here-nor-there.” The two versions we will focus on are, one attributed to Rumi, and the other to Baba Bulleh Shah. Each version has many renditions itself, as is the nature of any oral tradition – each orator, each singer, each poet, each translator gives it his/her own flavor, a new rendition while still remaining true to its spirit, while still representing the spiritual perspective. The first one, not according to quantitative chronological order, but rather qualitative personal-experience order, is that of Baba Bulleh Shah:

*Bulleya, ki janan mein kon*

O Bullah, what do I know who I am

*Na mein momin wich masitan*

Neither am I a believer in the mosque

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Na mein vich kufar di reet aan
Nor am I trapped in the tradition of disbelief

Na mein paak aan, Na paleet aan
Neither am I pure, Nor am impure

Na mein Musa, Na Phiroan
Neither am I Moses, Nor Pharaoh

Na mein aabi, Na mein khaki
Neither am I of water, Nor am I of land

Na mein aatish, Na mein pon
Neither am I fire, Nor am I wind

Bulleya ki janan mein kon
O Bullah, what do I know who I am

Awal aakhir aap nu janaan
Only knowing Self to be First and Last

Na koi duja hor pichanaan
Not recognizing any other else

Mein to na koi hor sayana
There is none wiser than Self

Bullah Shah khara hei kon
Who is this Bullah Shah standing here?\(^{101}\)

\(^{101}\) Bulleh Shah, “Bulleya” or “Bulla” (performed by Junoon and Rabbi Shergill) My Trans.
The second version is attributed to Rumi. In his book, *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi*, William Chittick (a contemporary Rumi scholar) notes that this poem is most likely “spurious,” but represents Rumi’s perspective nonetheless.102

What is to be done, O Moslems? for I do not recognize myself.

I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Gabr, nor Moslem.

I am not of the East, nor of the West, nor of the land, nor of the sea;

I am not of nature’s mint, nor of the circling heavens.

I am not of earth, nor of water, nor of air, nor of fire;

I am not of the empyrean, nor of the dust, nor of existence, nor of entity.

I am not of India, nor of China, nor of Bulgaria, nor of Saqsin;

I am not of the kingdom of ‘Iraqain, nor of the country of Khorasan.

I am not of this world, nor of the next, nor of Paradise, nor of Hell;

I am not of Adam, nor of Eve, nor of Eden and Rizwan.

My place is the Placeless, my trace is the Traceless;

‘Tis neither body nor soul, for I belong to the soul of the Beloved.

I have put duality away, I have seen the two worlds are one;

One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call…103

The two poems are clearly not unrelated, as the trope of liminality, neither-here-nor-there, non-duality is prominent in both of them, in fact, even some of the wording is the same. Both poems start off with the particular—Rumi starts by addressing a particular group “Oh Muslims!” and Shah starts by addressing his particular person, “Oh Bulleh!”

103 Chittick 76–78.
Both poems end with the Universal – Rumi ending with the One and Shah ending with the Self. Both start off with individuality, lyrically move through the neither-this-nor-that barzakhs, and end up in the Divine. In Shah’s case, the “Self” (capital S) that is used toward the end is not the same as – but is encompassing of – “self” (little s). Self, capital S, is referring to Nafs, capital N – the all-encompassing Self, the all-encompassing Nafs, the all-comprehensive Barzakh. As Murata reminds us, the Quran sometimes uses the word nafs to refer to God.¹⁰⁴ This self/Self, nafs/Nafs, reality/Reality, barzakh/Barzakh, one/One is what Minh-ha is referring to in Woman, Native, Other, in her language of i/I.

I am not i, am within and without i. I/i can be I or i, you and me both involved. We (capital W) sometimes include(s), other times exclude(s) me. You and I are close, we intertwine; you may stand on the other side of the hill once in a while, but you may also be me, while remaining what you are and what i am not.”¹⁰⁵

While Minh-ha is directly referring to the dualities of male/female and first world/third world in this particular book, the underlying bedrock of her, Shah’s, Rumi’s, Murata’s philosophies is the same: the perennial concept of self/other. They are critiquing dualistic modes of thinking. Minh-ha is doing it in the contemporary context of feminist and cultural studies, while the others are reflect on it in the context of religio-spirituality – the two not being mutually exclusive. In fact, the line “I am not of the East, nor of the West” could easily have been something Minh-ha writes, as she herself studies among other dualities, East-West philosophies.

¹⁰⁴ Murata 237.
¹⁰⁵ Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989) 90.
Professor Fatemeh Keshavarz, a Persian American professor of comparative literature and expert on Rumi’s poetry, commented at a conference on Rumi and Ibn ‘Arabi recently: Rumi poetry’s ending-places are turned into beginnings and what follows from these beginnings is left completely to the reader, alluring the reader to write the next page of poetry. 106 Heeding her call, moreover affirming her theory, I attempt the following:

What is to be done, O Feminists? for I cannot identify myself.
I am neither Androcentric, nor Gynocentric, nor Womanist, nor Feminist.
I am neither male, nor female, nor feminine, nor masculine;
I am neither man nor woman, nor girl nor boy.
I am neither heterosexual, nor homosexual, nor straight, nor cooked;
I am neither lesbian, nor gay, nor bisexual, nor queer.
I am neither transgender, nor transsexual, nor second sex, nor third gender;
I am not of patriarchy, nor of matriarchy, nor of my father, nor of my mother.
I am neither wife, nor husband, nor girlfriend, nor boyfriend;
I am neither brother, nor sister, nor mom, nor dad.
I am neither asexual, nor hypersexual, nor sex-crazed, nor sex-starved;
I am neither XX nor XY, nor a girly girl, nor a tomboy.
I am neither hermaphrodite, nor eunuch, nor unisex, nor drag queen;

I am (neither) a vagina monologue being performed (nor) on a phallic stage.

I am not of first world, nor of third world;

I am not of the hegemony, nor of the marginalized.

My gender is the Genderless, my sex is the Sexless;

‘Tis neither nature nor nurture, for I belong to the being of the Beloved.

I am moving past duality, I am seeing the two spheres are one;

One I long, One I realize, One I feel, One I cry…

The “O Feminists” could easily be replaced with O Women, O Americans, O Religionists, O Believers, O Academicians, or even remained “O Muslims” – although then perhaps the rendition that follows each would vary accordingly. Starting off with that particular, we move through the dualities. For example, while we think we have superficially moved past dualities, simply by adding more letters to the “LGBTQ” (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer) line-up, in reality, the logic functioning at the heart of the matter is still dualistic, is still oppositional binary, is still rigid compartmentalization, still lacking movement.

The dualities that I present in my list, along with the dualities eloquently presented in the poetry of Rumi and Shah, are reflections of what is being mirrored in Ibn ‘Arabi’s complex metaphysical theology, elucidated here by Murata:

There are no sharp edges in existence… ‘There is nothing in existence but barzakhs,’…or intermediate stages of existence. Everything lies between two other things…Neither absolute light (nur) nor absolute darkness (zulma) can be
found in the created realm…neither purely luminous nor purely dark…no absolute highness or lowness, so all things stand in the middle…no absolute subtlety or density…The middle world…is neither a spirit nor a body…neither luminous nor dark, but something in between…

That is to say, there are no clean compartments in existence. Everyone and everything is occupying a liminal space. There are no created absolutes, because the only Absolute is the Uncreated One, the One who neither begets, nor is He/She begotten, and there is none like unto Him/Her. The middle world is our world, the barzakh-reality is our life. It is all an in-between, because the only un-in-between is the one whom we call God – or Barzakh, or Reality, or Soul, or Nafs, or Self. As Shah says toward the end of his poem, I only know my self to be the first and the last, or only knowing Self to be First and Last. Two of the 99 attributes through which Muslims remember the Divine are ya Awal, ya Akhir, O First. O Last. “The actual situation stands between the Real…and a creature…within the two stations of firstness and lastness…But the Reality is one in all,” says Murata quoting Jami. This “one-in-all” is the Self-within-self which Shah speaks to when he says “there is none wiser than Self,” or whom Rumi refers to when he says “One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call…,” or what Minh-ha alludes to when she says “I am not i, am within and without i.”

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109 Murata 198.
(in)conclusion

There is no absolute light but God’s light, no absolute knowledge but God’s knowledge, no absolute power but God’s power, no absolute mercy but God’s mercy, no absolute good but God,\textsuperscript{110} and so on: this is precisely what is meant by the first part of the primary Islamic creed. The creed through the declaration of which one declares oneself a Muslim, \textit{lailaha ill’allah}, there is no God but God – no absolute but the Absolute,\textsuperscript{111} no \textit{nafs} but the all-encompassing \textit{Nafs}, no self but the all-encompassing Self, no \textit{barzakh} but the all-comprehensive \textit{Barzakh}, no gender but the all-comprehensive Gender, no sex but the all-comprehensive Sex, no liminality but the all-comprehensive Liminality. When Sufis speak of \textit{fanaa}, annihilation, it is precisely this annihilation to which they allude: to move toward annihilating our insignificant liminalities in the Greater Liminality.

What Ibn ‘Arabi presents through metaphysical language, Rumi and Bulleh Shah present through poetic language, Minh-ha presents through feminist language. We moved through Ibn ‘Arabi and Murata’s metaphysical dualities of soul/spirit, mirrored in the natural dualities of fresh water/salt water, to Rumi and Bulleh Shah’s perennial dualities of Muslim/nonMuslim, East/West, Adam/Eve, to Minh-ha’s and Butler’s dualities of male/female, masculine/feminine, first world/third world. The question I am positing is: how does the underlying Islamic metaphysical theme of questioning dualities, questioning dualistic modes of thinking, questioning oppositional modes of thinking, add to the dialogue of questioning gender binaries in the context of today’s feminist theory?

While duality is inherently painful and problematic, it is an existential necessity. The

\textsuperscript{110} Murata 131.
\textsuperscript{111} Murata 133.
process of creation requires separation, hence, duality. And although Islamic mystical thought does not call for an erasure of dualities, emphasizing the importance of boundaries in order to have any kind of stability at all, it still calls for a more fluid approach and can help us in reframing the discourse on compartmentalization.

Clearly, there is a universe of gender theory waiting to be explored. Murata summarizes for us nicely in one of her many profound segments:

In short, Ibn al-‘Arabi’s teachings on the spiritual significance of sexuality are a guide for those few members of the human race who have the intellectual and spiritual gifts to put them to practical use. For people in general, he has no prescriptions outside the Shariite teachings on human relationships; in other words, he accepts the “patriarchal” orientation of those Islamic teachings that stress God’s incomparability and difference. But he has further advice for those who are making a serious attempt to integrate all dimensions of their own existence into the Real. Such people should recognize that God’s similarity and sameness with the cosmos allow for a totally positive evaluation of the feminine dimensions of reality.\textsuperscript{112}

I would dive one level deeper to say, God’s similarity and sameness with the cosmos allow for a totally positive evaluation of the gendered dimensions of reality, allow for a totally positive evaluation of the sexual dimension of reality – including but not limited to allowing for a totally positive (re)evaluation of the theoretical dimension of Feminism. In other words, awareness and recognition of the Divine presence in all that is around us,

\textsuperscript{112} Murata 199.
allows not only religionists and theists room to breathe, but moreover, sheds a new light on gender and sexuality studies today. What Murata is calling “intellectual and spiritual gifts,” Panikkar calls “preliminary interior silence.” Similar sentiments are echoed by Panikkar when he says: speaking of God requires the prerequisite of inner silence, a preliminary purity of heart that knows how to listen to the voice of transcendence (divine) in immanence (human)…Without the silence of the intellect and the will, without the silence of the senses, without the openness of what some call “the third eye,” it is not possible to approach the sphere in which the word God can have a meaning.\textsuperscript{113}

Neither have I special intellectual gifts, nor have I exceptional spiritual presents; neither have I prerequisite of interior silence, nor have I preliminary purity of heart. This study is merely an effort to move toward that which is Real(ized), that which is (Un)known, that which I see(k), that where I (be)long.

Thus far we have focused largely on a theoretical discussion of liminality in Islamic traditional and mystical thought. We have witnessed a play on gender roles, gendered language, gendered symbolism and imagery, to question dualistic modes of thinking, gendered or otherwise. This chapter will give a concrete example of some of these theoretical ideas; the philosophical notions presented in this thesis are embodied in the example of the South Asian hijra (“third gender”) community. As discussed earlier, the word hijra is an umbrella term for all those who do not fit into the binaries of heterosexual male and female, including but not limited to homosexuals, effeminate males, castrated males, masculine females, transgendered persons, transsexual people, those born in “birth defects” or ambiguous genitalia, and so on. Hijra identity embodies characteristics of the people of the Heights, occupying the physical and social barzakh, being neither-here-nor-there on the gender/sexuality binary, perpetually keeping hope alive for a better life.

Lucy Lippard, a feminist writer, activist, and curator, writes in her book *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America,*

Ironic, humor, and subversion are the most common guises and disguises of those artists leaping out of the melting pot into the fire. They hold mirrors up to the
dominant culture, slyly infiltrating mainstream art with alternative experiences – inverse, reverse, perverse.\textsuperscript{114} Lippard calls this process “Turning around…: the simple (and not so simple) reversal of an accepted image.”\textsuperscript{115} This “turning around” is the same \textit{ulat pher} the mystic mentioned in the “\textit{Gorakh Dhanda}” verses – on one level, the Sufis themselves employ “turning around,” reversing/inversing gender roles and using “perverse” eroticism to make a point. On another level, they are complaining to God about all this contradictory nonsense, this “backward twirling” between heaven/hell, good/evil. Just as Sufis are those artists who use irony, humor, and subversion to hold mirrors up to the dominant culture, slyly infiltrating mainstream religion with alternative experiences, hijras are also those artists who use irony, humor, and subversion to hold mirrors up to the dominant culture, slyly infiltrating mainstream heteronormativity with alternative experiences. Just as the status of the Qur’anic People of the Heights is simple-and-not-so-simple, just as the gendered roles and relationships presented in Sufi poetry are simple-and-not-so-simple, the status and identity of hijras is also simple-and-not-simple. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss Lippard’s concept of “turning around” (Sufi concept of \textit{ulat pher}) via the illustration of individuals who self-identify as hijras, and moreover, rather than simply superimpose an American feminist’s perspective onto the subject of hijra identity, to utilize the theme of liminality in Islamic thought discussed thus far as an alternative theoretical approach to weaving a gendered analysis of the topic at hand.

\textsuperscript{114} Lucy Lippard, \textit{Mixed Blessings} (New York: Pantheon, 1990) 199.  
\textsuperscript{115} Lippard 200.
Hijras: People of the Heights, Embodied

Hijras personify the various characteristics of the People of the Heights, including height/transcendence, ambiguity/veiled-ness, gnosis/knowledge, and hope/longing/aspiration. Like the People of the Heights, they are at once both honored and rejected; somehow they are both looked up to and yet marginalized. They are marginalized, yet they keep hope alive for a better life, aspiring to one day be accepted by mainstream society. Just as the Qur’anic verses on the Heights occupy an ambiguous status in the Holy Book, just as Men of the Heights seemingly occupy an ambiguous status in the hereafter, hijras occupy an ambiguous status both physically and socially in today’s society.

Hijras are both revered and derided at the same time. Hijras are called to perform dances, comedic acts, and blessings at wedding ceremonies and birth celebrations, yet, they are pushed away like a disease if they ask for more money than one would give to a beggar or lowly entertainer. For example, Hindus invite hijras to birth celebrations to bless the baby, and Muslims believe that the dua (prayer) and especially baddua (wishing ill) of a naked hijra is always accepted by God, bringing fortune or misfortune accordingly to the household. In other words, they are believed to be occupying spiritual heights, particularly when they are unveiled (naked) – if their prayers are so readily accepted, they must possess a certain level of gnosis that the rest of us can only hope to attain. Yet, due to their physically liminal status, they are rejected by society, and

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116 I Am That, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORRuMIIH2hk
117 I Am That.
118 Bol, (Dir. Shoaib Mansoor, 2011).
in turn, they can only hope to one day have equal status as the rest of us who so easily chose from the binary of heaven and hell, male or female, masculine or feminine, homosexual or heterosexual. Like the verses of “I have made friends with those in the Heights,” from one angle, we can only hope to be like them in the spiritual realm, from another, like some of the Qur’anic Heights verse readings, they can only hope to be accepted by mainstream society, to “get into heaven,” longing for (Divine) mercy.

Those who occupy liminal spaces, who do not neatly fit into the compartments created by society for gender and sexuality, have always faced persecution and marginalization. Similar to the Sufi saints and the spiritually accomplished, hijras also execute a critique of hegemony through creative expression. There are countless contemporary personal narratives on social media outlets, in which those who self-identify as hijras or third gender reveal their agonizing stories. One story is that of a young individual named Sachin, later turned Sakshi, who shares his narrative of how he grew up cross-dressing, and from a very young age, wanted to dance and act like female Bollywood actresses. At first, his family encouraged this behavior. He even performed a feminine dance at school and received much praise and adulation. But as he grew older, his family started to grow weary of his increasingly feminizing gender performances. After some initial hesitation, Sachin started to spend time with the local hijra community. One day, his older brother discovered that Sachin was cross-dressing and confronted him about it in front of this mother. When Sachin attempted to explain himself, the older brother became violent and hit Sachin. This type of behavior continued, and the verbal

119 Third Soul Documentary, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ud41rbqfkXA
and physical abuse escalated. One day, Sachin’s older brother got into a fight with him about making Sachin cut his hair. When Sachin refused and fought back, he pulled him by the hair and told him to leave the house. Sachin decided to pack his bags and leave.\textsuperscript{120}

Or using Lippard’s metaphor, he decided to leap out of the melting pot and into the fire. Sachin goes on to explain that he had no choice but to find shelter within the hijra community he used to spend time with. After some time, he started feeling guilty for not carrying his own weight and decided to join his hijra friends in earning money through begging on the streets and providing cheap entertainment by dancing at parties in the evenings. He exclaims how bad he felt for doing all of this and still fears what will happen if his family ever finds out, but he believed he had no choice.\textsuperscript{121}

This is simply one of the multitudes of illustrations of artists leaping out of the melting pot and into the fire. There are countless such stories taking place regularly in regards to violence perpetrated against hijras on a daily basis across South Asia. The violence against women and sexual minorities is systemic and deeply ingrained in the social and economic structures. Given the increasingly institutionalized marginalization of sexual minorities in the Indian subcontinent, since colonialism, hijras have had no choice but to resort to beggary, prostitution, and the art of cheap entertainment as their only sources of survival. Left with a lack of basic human rights, hijras are frequent targets of police brutality in addition to being vulnerable to rape and sexual harassments on the streets.\textsuperscript{122}

As long as there was a metaphorical veil on Sachin’s identity, the family not

\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Third Soul Documentary}.

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Third Soul Documentary}.

only put up with, but encouraged his behavior. But as time went on, and the veil lifted to show his true identity, not only his family, but society could no longer handle the weight of reality, reacting with violence and sheer brutality.

Hijra veiling-unveiling is not merely metaphorical in the rhetorical realm, but is also literal in the social world. Gayatri Reddy’s ethnographic study elucidates, the performance of lifting saris to show their (lack of) genitalia is a threat hijras use to get what they want (e.g., money, respect, etc.)\(^{123}\) Under her section titled “(Dis)Embodied Exposures, Revealing Practices,” Reddy quotes interviewees’ comments: “[Hijras] are shameless. They have no honor. They are answerable to no one...they have no sarm (shame),” explaining they are “a people freed from the constraints of decency that regulate the rest of society”...by virtue of their...gender ambiguity...[they] are considered to be outside the social mainstream and thus to have “no sarm”...[serving] as potential repositories of shamelessness...exposing that by which they are construed as shameless...\(^{124}\)

By unveiling their private parts, they expose society’s discomfort with that which is ambiguous; they lift the veil on a neatly divided worldview, forcing one to question dualistic modes of thought. By lifting their saris, they lift the screen on not only their own genital ambiguity but also on the ambiguity that is part and parcel of gender and sexuality.


\(^{124}\) Reddy 139.
Through the use of such acts of performance art in their day-to-day lives, hijras hold mirrors up to the dominant culture, to the hegemonic, heteronormative society.

Rumi says,

Let go of your worries
And be completely clear-hearted,
Like the face of a mirror
That contains no images.
If you want a clear mirror,
Behold yourself
And the see the shameless truth,
Which the mirror reflects…
Between the mirror and the heart
Is this single difference:
The heart conceals secrets,
While the mirror does not.¹²⁵

Rumi is eloquently pointing out that the mirror does not conceal anything, it shows all. It has no secrets. It is shameless truth. Just as hijras are perceived as human beings with no shame by the *vox populi*, they are the metaphorical mirror of self-reflectivity within any given society. Lippard’s mirror and Rumi’s mirror of self-reflectivity are both symbolic of the *barzakh* state of self-review. The shamelessness Reddy’s interviewee expresses is analogous to the shameless truth Rumi sees in his clear mirror. On one hand, hijras

proudly wear this badge of shamelessness. Unlike men and especially women, hijras have no qualms about lifting their clothes and showing that which is considered private or shameful. They are “slyly infiltrating…[the] mainstream with alternative experiences – inverse, reverse, perverse.” On the other hand, because the public perceives this as a shameful act, one not to associate oneself with at all costs, this performance is used as a threat to get one’s way. As Reddy explains, hijras are well aware that their shamelessness makes people afraid to incite public confrontations with them. “Hijras in turn use this knowledge to their advantage, threatening to lift their saris if their demands are not met” [my italics]. This “in turn” is an illustration of the theoretical concept of “turning around” which Lippard proposes. Like Lippard’s artists of resistance, the shameless gain the power of shaming others. Acting as mirrors, they force society to “behold yourself and see the shameless truth” that Rumi talks about. That shameless truth being how uncomfortable society is with unveiling, even more so, unveiling of that which is ambiguous. We are ashamed of that which is different, that which is the Other, that which is liminal, that which is ambiguous, that which does not fit neatly into the rigid compartments we have created for ourselves over time (i.e., man, woman, male, female, etc.). We are so ashamed, yet, we have no remorse when it comes to shaming the Other, to ridicule the Other, to marginalize the Other, to abuse the Other. We cannot seem to “let go of our worries” about rigid labeling and stiff sexualities, therefore are unable to be

126 Lippard 199.  
127 Reddy 139.  
128 Reddy 139.
completely “clear-hearted.” Our mirrors are filled with “images” – images of an unrealistic, idealized, sanitized world, one which does not exist in reality.

Hijras are a socially and economically marginalized community in the Subcontinent. The role of performance art as a means of survival and an art of resistance is critical in understanding hijra identity formation. Given their othered status, they adapt not only to survive but also to form unique individual and group identities through what Lippard called “turning around.” Through the use of irony, humor, and subversion in their day-to-day lives, they unveil ambiguity challenging society into barzakh states of self-reflection and self-criticism. In her section titled “The Mimesis of Femininity and Parodic Gender Subversion,” Reddy discusses Judith Butler’s famous critique on gender construction: She says, Butler argues

…for the understanding of (all) gender as “performance” and…parody as the most effective strategy for subverting the fixed “binary frame” of gender… “Our identities, gendered and otherwise, do not express some authentic inner “core” self but are the dramatic effect (rather than cause) of our performances”…all identities are performative, and conscious parody of such performance is what subverts both category and lived reality of gender…

Hijras are quintessential parodic performance artists whose livelihoods serve to subvert the fixed binary frame of gender, through irony and humor. Just as the People of the Heights subvert the heaven-hell binary through irony – it is ironic that they can somehow both have place of spiritual heights and yet still be hoping for God’s mercy in the Muslim

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129 Reddy 135.
intellectual psyche. Just as Sufi poetry and parables subvert both traditional understandings of gender roles and gendered language through irony and humor. The dramatic effects that hijra identities express range from threatening performances like the lifting of the saris, to literal parody performances at weddings, birth celebrations and other gatherings. Hijras are invited (and sometimes come uninvited), to sing and dance, clap loudly, behave flirtatiously, make sexual innuendos and attract all kinds of attention (sexual and otherwise) as they entertain the masses. In a society where women face dire consequences for unveiling to varying degrees, discouraged from singing and dancing in public, looked down upon for openly flirting with the opposite sex, and even discouraged from laughing too loudly, the hijras are there to “turn it around” – “it” being gender norms and expectations – through their performances and their larger-than-life personalities. This kind of conscious parody of what a proper woman is supposed to behave like serves to subvert, serves to hold up that mirror to society Lippard and Rumi talk about, serve as sly infiltrations via the inverse, reverse, perverse. Hijras personify the veil between heaven and hell in the world of male and female, masculine and feminine binaries. Through their loud exclamations (i.e., singing, clapping) and laughter, their exaggerated gestures (i.e., provocative hip and chest movements in dancing), they make others laugh along with them. Rumi calls laughter the “essence of Ultimate Truth”\textsuperscript{130} – laughter which possesses many layers of meanings, that laughter which if seen cursorily may communicate happiness, but it takes a turning around, an unveiling, to understand a deeper pain, a more problematic context.

\textsuperscript{130} Idries Shah, \textit{Special Illumination} (London: Octagon, 1977) 3.
For those on the heights, along with veiling-unveiling comes the thread of hoping and aspiring. As Lippard exclaims, this cycle of turning around is a simple-and-not-so-simple reversal of an accepted image. The accepted image of what/who a hijra is supposed to be is being challenged today through processes that are also excruciatingly simple-and-not-so-simple. The most recent example of this is how hijras are finding or being offered new modes of making a living.

Being at the bottom of the heap in India is perhaps one of the most difficult sentences life could pass. You learn to grab what you can, and for some an opportunity has appeared in an odd form…Mr. Shetty…a Bombay debt collector…has worked out a brand new way to repossess using the dispossessed…[his company] uses eunuchs to embarrass debtors into paying…Mr. Shetty is undoubtedly in it for the money, but [none of the hijras] are complaining. For them to work in so-called “normal society” is a step toward freedom.131

Yes, hijras are finally gaining employment opportunities outside of prostitution and street begging. Conversely, they are being exploited by local businessmen who want to use their liminal status to embarrass debtors into paying up. A hijra named Shabina responds to the circumstances by stating, “After coming into eunuchs’ [community], I was very much depressed by the way of living. That means by begging. But somehow, by God’s grace, today I am working. From one year I am working. I’m very much happy.”132 She

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131 A Eunuch’s Life, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDoVLDHSQYQ
132 A Eunuch’s Life.
hopes that her next job will be as a social worker helping others like herself. Shabina’s comments echo those of Sachin/Sakshi. The feelings of depression due to being separated from family, the feelings of guilt having to do with prostituting oneself or begging on the streets, the feelings of fear, anxiety and insecurity as to one’s social and financial status, all add up to provide the complicated and frustrated circumstances hijras face in their liminal worlds. Yet, there is a consistent hanging on to the rope of hope, a consistent attitude of aspiration and longing for a better life. These new job opportunities, even if as debt collectors for shrewd businessmen, are a welcome change for those individuals who no longer want to prostitute themselves, beg on the streets, or be the dancing jokers of festive events. Hijras are not only working as debt collectors for private businessmen, but also as tax collectors for the government. What started as an Indian practice, according to one CNN report, is now being adopted by the Pakistani government. “Transgender tax collectors” – as the title of one report stated – are an increasingly popular trend in the city of Karachi as tax evasion has burgeoned into an intractable issue. Once again, irony is staring back at us and smirking. The “hijras are gaining respectability by using the only asset they have: their lack of it.” Once again, hope is staring back at us and smirking: despite the many layers of othering and oppression, despite their veiled liminal existence, hijras do not fail to keep hope alive for what may one day result in redemption, worldly or otherwise.

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133 A Eunuch’s Life.  
134 Nadia Bilchik, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrK-aSC1x3g  
135 Bilchik, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrK-aSC1x3g  
The many layers of liminality or othering indicate the 70 veils of light mentioned in the hadith. In the case of hijras, for example, one cannot simply gloss over all gender/sexuality differences and state that we are all the same, and that there is no difference between hijras and those who identify as man or woman. Moreover, one cannot even state that all hijras are the same. As Reddy underscores in her ethnographic study, there are various differences in the language and behavior of self-identification even within and among those who are labeled as hijras.\textsuperscript{137} For example, in her study of one particular city of the Indian south, Reddy mentions such terms as narans, kotis, and pantis to differentiate traditional sexual archetypes among the Third Genders. Narans are women based on anatomy and gendered practice, kotis take on the feminine receptive role in same-sex encounters with men, and pantis are the partners to kotis and/or narans.\textsuperscript{138} Again, as Minh-ha had pointed-out, difference is critical, but it does not have to be set up in adversarial terms. Each “difference” represents a veil, and there are countless veils. With the lifting of each veil, with the understanding of each difference, comes a familiarity, comes a one-step-closer, to the totality of the Divine. A superficial reading of the notions being discussed here would render a simplistic notion of universalism. Only one who is acutely astute enough to understand the irony would arrive at the underlying theme: there is no universalism without particulars – a key to understanding the Other and the relationship of the Other with the Self.

If God’s promise in the Qur’an holds true, if those who occupy a lowly status on earth are in reality ultimately guaranteed forgiveness, then what does it say about the

\textsuperscript{137} Reddy 211-228.
\textsuperscript{138} Reddy 214.
status of hijras in the spiritual realm? The above discussion illustrates the personification of liminal spaces through hijra identity. The examples given thus far embody characteristics of veiling-unveiling, height/gnosis, and hope/aspiration. Given Lippard’s concept of turning-around, we see hijras and spiritualists jumping out of the melting pot and into the fire: the fire of *barzakh*, the fire of longing.

**Neither-here-nor-there: Neither-man-nor-woman**

Hijras do not simply reside in liminal social spaces, but are also quite literally the liminal faces of South Asian society. In their appearance, in their manners, in their style, they are those who cannot neatly be divided as male or female, masculine or feminine, homosexual or heterosexual, and so on. They are neither-here-nor-there on the dualities of gender and sexuality, living in the *barzakh*, in the intermediate world, between male and female, masculine and feminine.

As a case in point: hijras, on one hand, claim to be women, and on the other say they are neither man nor woman. Reddy discusses in her chapter titled “(Per)Formative Selves: The Production of Gender,” how hijras strive for feminine beauty through various practices. For example, some hijras go through the *nirvan* (rebirth) operation resulting in physical emasculation, some take hormones to sculpt their bodies in an attempt to grow their *chati* (breasts), others tweeze their beards, bleach their skin, and let their hair grow out, while almost all wear women’s jewelry, makeup and clothing.\(^{139}\) Moreover, some admit to fantasizing about nursing children, and others claim having post-operative

\(^{139}\) Reddy 121-141.
bodily discharges similar to menstrual periods.\textsuperscript{140} Despite all of these painstaking efforts and wishes to feminize the body, hijras do not decidedly declare themselves as women. “We are neither men nor women; we are hijras” is the common reply when asked about their gender affiliation.\textsuperscript{141} Just as Sufis use feminine imagery and symbolism to subvert gender roles and hierarchies, hijras use women’s dress and grooming techniques to subvert the gender binary. Beyond merely subversion, Sufis use such gendered imagery and symbolism to reveal their insufficiency and partiality, their inability to express divine love, reiterating the notion that divine love cannot be expressed from one side of the gender divide. Just as Sufi poetry refers to the Divine with feminine language and symbolism, yet in a way that forces one to question duality all together, just as the Qur’an refers to God with masculine language, yet God is neither male nor female. Given the background literature presented in the Introduction chapter, most contemporary academic discussions obsessively revolve around whether the Sufi poet is male or female, the singer is a male or female, the storyteller is a male or female, in the same vein, they obsessively revolve around whether hijras are male or female, masculine or feminine, homosexual or heterosexual, transgender or cross-dressers, and so on. In the same vein, we obsessively engage in circular debate over whether God is a male or female, or which pronouns to use for the Divine (i.e.: Panikkar’s discussion on “Man” presented earlier). What all of these dialogues have in common – or what all of such research fails to realize – is that it is neither-here-nor-there. And it is precisely this non-duality which allows for movement.

\textsuperscript{140} Reddy 134. \\
\textsuperscript{141} Reddy 134.
What may seem to be contradictory behavior or attitudes – painfully feminizing the body, then again, claiming that we are neither male-nor-female – are representative of God’s seemingly contradictory attributes. How can one be both the First and the Last? How can one be both the Source of Love and the Judge? As the example discussed earlier of Zahir and Batin: how can one be both manifest and non-manifest? How can one be both apparent and hidden? The hijras embody such characteristics, by at once being overtly “feminine” and yet being “neither masculine nor feminine.” What is manifest to the naked eye is simply a veil to cover a hidden world, a realm that is not apparent to those who fail to look beyond the superficial. Hijras are their own veil just as the Divine is His/Her own Veil.

The neither-here-nor-there theme we found in Rumi and Bulleh Shah’s poetry is the philosophical underpinning that is a *sine qua non* in our approach to understanding those whom we label as the Other, those who we label as hijras. It is a blatant criticism, a deliberate disruption of the oppositional binary mode of thinking (i.e. male-female, man-woman). It challenges polarizing extremes and absolutist modes of thought. As in the neither-here-nor-there poems, nobody is absolutely pure or absolutely impure; nobody is as purely virtuous as a Prophet or as evil as Pharoah. As in the case of hijras, nobody is absolutely masculine or absolutely feminine, absolutely male or absolutely female. What is critical here is to creatively create liminal spaces for the Other, for discourse with the Other, and an understanding imbued with empathy for the Other – to allow for grey areas, for fluidity, rather than rigid compartmentalization. Both Shah and Reddy are addressing the same dilemma: the constant negotiation between our ids and our superegos, that
“inseparable, ‘fluid relationship between ideal and experience…’,” with each related to the other…each ‘constantly being transformed one into the other.’ The space between ideal and experience is that realm of the veil where ideal is superimposed on the fragmentary nature of experience.

If hijra constructions of gender…teach us anything at all, it is that notions of culture, self, and meaning can only be comprehended through the unresolved tensions between such desire and experience, between individuals’ ideals and practices…we “have to come to terms with the fact that “meaning” cannot be pinned down, is always sought but never apprehended, is never this and never that, never here nor there, but always in between, always inherently elusive and always inherently ambiguous”…a viewpoint that hijras would readily endorse. A viewpoint Muslim mystics philosophize and a viewpoint hijras endorse. This never-this-and-never-that, never-here-nor-there is the same neither-here-nor-there Rumi and Shah express. A viewpoint and a hard-earned lesson by Western feminists: meaning does not come out of rigid labeling and compartmentalizing, meaning is the child bore from unresolved tensions between desires and experiences, between ideals and practices, meaning is to be found in the elusive, ambiguous crevices between the supposed oppositional binaries we think we have so concretely set up.

Once again, we see the trope of ambiguity within liminality emerge. Reddy discusses hijra performances problematizing any easy characterization of gender ideals. She says that their

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142 Reddy 227.
143 Reddy 227.
…practices serve as performative correctives to an easy understanding of their identity as merely embodying a resignification of existing gender patterns. Instead, these dramatic hijra performances necessitate a critical reflection on hijras’ role in this debate and indicate that they are neither only subversive agents of resistance nor simply particularly flamboyant feminine surrogates. Hijras appear to embody both these images/ideals, and their gender performances instantiate their “inherently ambiguous” and axial position in the Indian imaginary.¹⁴⁴

Just as Sufi poetry and storytelling serve as performative correctives to an easy understanding of human behavior, human identity, human feelings, and necessitate a critical reflection on our roles – as humans, as Muslims, as spiritual beings, as men and women, as the Other – in this debate with the Divine, in this debate with other humans, indicating that we are neither subversive agents of resistance nor simple-minded subservient slaves. Whilst we embody divine ideals and images (e.g., in both the Bible and the Qur’an, God speaks of creating Man in God’s own Image¹⁴⁵ and breathing God’s Spirit into Man,¹⁴⁶ respectively), our performances on the stage of life instantiate the inherent ambiguity of reality. This neither-only-subservient-agents-nor-subservient-slaves concept is precisely what is expressed so eloquently by Shah and Rumi in their poetry discussed earlier. It is precisely what Ibn ‘Arabi is alluding to when he says there are no absolutes, there is nothing in existence but barzakhs.

¹⁴⁴ Reddy 136.
¹⁴⁵ Genesis 1:26.
¹⁴⁶ Quran 15:29.
There is nothing in existence but states of self-review, states of self-reflection. In order to convey this message to the masses, mystics throughout history have not only used irony, but humor as well. The use of humor to criticize those in power (i.e.: lawmakers, religious clerics, governmental entities, royalty, upper-class or elites of society, etc.) is a common theme within Sufi poetry, parables, and philosophy. An example of an Idries Shah teaching-story called “Whose Beard?” in his book *The World of Nasruddin* goes as the following:

Nasruddin dreamt that he had Satan’s beard in his hand. Tugging the hair he cried: “The pain you feel is nothing compared to that which you inflict on mortals you lead astray.” And he gave the beard such a tug that he woke up yelling in agony. Only then did he realize that the beard he held in his hand was his own.\(^\text{147}\)

What Shah is poignantly pointing out through the character of Nasruddin is the shortcomings of the human intellect. That which we label as Satan, or Evil, or the Devil, that which we like to label as the Other, so that we may have someone to point a finger at, in reality, turns out to be the Self. That which we choose to othererize says more about the Self than it does about the Other. Shah is using humor to hold up that mirror Lippard and Rumi talk about, the mirror of self-review. On one level, the author is using the character of Nasruddin to hold up the mirror to the character; his dream acts as a mirror, making him realize what he thought was Satan turns out to be the Self. On another level, the story itself is acting as a mirror for religious clerics/fundamentalists/elites, forcing them to question their assumptions about reality, and in turn, Reality. Lippard and Shah

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are both highlighting the same insight: we are all wearing guises and disguises, whether we choose to recognize that and jump into the fire is another matter. We are all in intermediary states at some level, whether we utilize that to attain spiritual heights, whether we utilize that to move closer to our Pir/Yaar/Beloved is another matter.

The movement that was characteristic of Ibn ‘Arabi’s barzakh, is the movement we find in the worlds of both mystics and hijras. Throughout history, Sufis have been persecuted and marginalized for their beliefs, for their criticisms of hegemonic religious, cultural, and political practices. Threatened by their fluid movement between the worldly and the otherworldly, between the self and the other, society reacts with persecution and ultimately annihilation. The exemplary story, often told through songs and poetry, is of Mansur Al-Hallaj, a thirteenth century Persian revolutionary writer and teacher of Sufism.\footnote{John Garraty, \textit{The Columbia History of the World} (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 288.} Al-Hallaj was known for attaining spiritual trances in which he would exclaim, “Ana’l-haqq,” “I am the Truth.” Al-Haq is also one of the 99 names of God. While Al-Hallaj was simply holding up the mirror, forcing people to conduct a tempiternal self-review, forcing one to question the relationship of the Self and the Other, of the Self with the Divine, his utterances were misconstrued as though Al-Hallaj was claiming God’s position. His ability to move fluidly between the Self and Other, to move between Man and God, led to his worldly demise. After spending 11 years in prison, he was publicly executed for heresy.\footnote{Cyril Glasse. \textit{The New Encyclopedia of Islam} (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2001) 164.} Some accounts say his body was cut up into pieces and he happily allowed his body parts to be thrown into the fire. Many parallels can easily be drawn
between the story of Al-Hallaj and Jesus Christ. The stories of those who are executed for their positions of spiritual heights and worldly lowliness, for their fluidity in movement between the godly and the earthly, and moreover, their ironic stories serve as *barzakh* mirrors for all those who come after them, those who leap out of the melting pot and into the fire.

A more contemporary example of Sufis being thrown into the fire would be the terrorist attacks across various Sufi saint shrines in South Asia. In recent years, particularly since 9/11, the rise of militant groups in South Asia has led to an onslaught of bomb blasts across Sufi saint shrines in the Subcontinent.\(^{150, 151}\) Whether we label them “militant groups,” “terrorists,” “extremists,” or “fundamentalists,” the underlying problem is the same: they are offended by the Other, offended by the movement characteristic of Sufi thought and philosophy, that which is within their own supposed belief system of Islam yet does not conform to their standards of rigid faith and virtue. Sufi beliefs, practices, and traditions offend those who believe such beliefs, practices, and traditions lie outside the realm of Islam, therefore are heretical. Those who are slaves to compartmentalization, slaves to oppositional-binary modes of thinking (i.e.: male, female, believer, disbeliever, etc.), those who cannot reconcile the difference between our ideals and our experiences, those who cannot recognize the negotiation process that takes place between the Self and the Other with every breath we take, find it easier to throw the Other into fire rather than reach across and attempt to understand the Other – all the while

\(^{150}\) http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/07/41_killed_in_triple.php  
\(^{151}\) http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/03/world/asia/03pstan.html
failing to see how deeply intertwined the Self and Other are, all the while failing to see that when we throw the Other into fire, we are also extinguishing the Self.

The relationship between hijras and Sufism is reified in the story of Tarabai, passed down from generation-to-generation of Indian hijras:

There was once a hijra named Tarabai who desperately wanted children of her own. So she went to Ajmer Baba and asked for this wish to be granted. Only, she said, “I wanted a child to be produced in my womb,” and did not explicitly ask for it to be born. So her pregnancy continued several months and finally, unable to bear the pain and burden any longer, Tarabai slit her stomach and removed the baby, killing herself and the baby. But to this day, hijras who go to Ajmer Baba’s dargah [shrine] inevitably pay homage to Tarabai as well.152

These tombs and shrines of Sufi saints serve as spaces that welcome the Other all over South Asia.153 For the most part (at least comparatively to most other worship houses), these are physical and spiritual spaces that are welcoming to all marginalized communities, and tend not to discriminate based on gender/sexuality, religious creed, cultural or political affiliations, etc. For example, non-Muslim worshippers are welcome and come willingly to pay homage to Muslim Saints. In the same vein, even though hijras are shooed away like inferior creatures in everyday settings outside homes and on the streets, they are welcomed and incorporated into these shrine communities and cultures such as the shrine of Sufi saint Moinuddin Chishti, also known as Ajmer Baba.

Moreover, even though women are not usually welcomed in many mosques across South

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152 Reddy 134-135.
153 http://www.flickr.com/photos/firozeshakir/5467385044/
Asia, the irony of hijras, the supposedly inferior, ambiguous gender, being welcomed into holy spaces like the Sufi saints’ shrines is of particular interest and worthy of notice.

Whether we are talking about the literal fire of Al-Hallaj, the literal fire of violence and abuse, or the figurative fire of pain, agony, and othering experienced by hijras and Sufis, these are those artists and spiritualists who leap out of the melting pot and into the fire – movement being the key underlying element. From one perspective, the Self is leaping into the fire willingly. For example, Sachin chose to leave his house, Sufis choose to follow in the path of strict spiritual training, they choose to criticize those in power. From another perspective, the Other is being thrown into the fire. For example, through extreme violence, through institutionalized discrimination, hijras and Sufis are rejected by the mainstream and thrown into the margins. Yet again, it takes the perceptive to the see the “turning around” taking place, to see the consistent movement taking place, to witness the unveiling taking place, to see the complexity of the process at hand, to see the ironic mirroring. Given the limited choices of survival, hijras, Sufis, artists, while being forcefully thrown into the fire, are also jumping wholeheartedly into the fire. To be true to the Self, they are owning their Otherness, owning their liminality.

There are many layers of movement when it comes to hijra identity. On one level, there is the physical movement of dance and lewd parody, the exaggerated hand and facial expressions, in addition to the overtly flamboyant style of walking, moving hips from side to side when strutting down streets. On another level, there is the movement between male and female, masculine and feminine. Refusing to be pigeonholed into the compartments of “man” or “woman,” hijras move fluidly in between and through
categories of man, woman, male, female, masculine, feminine, transgender, transsexual and so on. On a third level, seeing with the third eye, hijras embody the movement which signifies increasing ontological intensity. Given their liminal status, one which transcends or is “above” the dualistic categories of gender and sexuality, they are at once both on spiritual heights and still hoping for a better life.

More than simply being an intermediary world, as our earlier discussion illustrated, the term barzakh connotes not only movement, but struggle, suffering, and longing. As in Ibn ‘Arabi’s concept of the heart-as-barzakh, we see a likeness to the invisible barrier between fresh water and salt water, which both allows and prevents the two bodies of water from meeting. Hijras are that invisible barrier between the two gendered/sexualized sides of society, man and woman, male and female, masculine and feminine. They may be “invisible” in the sense that the hegemonic society refuses to recognize them as equal human beings, yet like the nafs, they represent that state of societal self-review, forcing others to question dualistic modes of thought, breaking beyond the gender binary. And just like the human reality-as-barzakh, hijras are those individuals who bring together manifestation and non-manifestation, bring together that which is apparent with that which is hidden. What may seem to be clear is covered in layers upon layers of veils, ambiguity, and light.
SUMMARY

This study is an exercise in reflecting on the theme of liminality found throughout Islamic thought with a view toward questioning the gender binary. In a truly interdisciplinary fashion, the thesis weaves together feminist theory, Islamic philosophy, and South Asian cultural studies into a veil—a veil which both reveals and conceals the world of those who lie in gendered liminality, as any attempt to describe or define something, insofar as it is necessarily partial, also “veils” that thing. Opening with Islamic traditional thought, the discussion begins from the traditional texts of Quran, hadith, and the metaphysical theories of a prominent figure of the Islamic intellectual tradition, Ibn ‘Arabi. Using the mysterious Qur’anic verses about “People of the Heights” (those who are in-between Heaven and Hell in the hereafter) and the metaphysical analysis of the eschatological concept of barzakh (the state of self-review in the grave one resides in after death and before the Day of Judgment), we embark on this discourse on the trope of liminality and liminal spaces found throughout Islamic thought. Growing out of that, we follow the manifestation of this theme of liminality into Islamic mystical thought, particularly as expressed through South Asian poetry.

Using lyrical examples from poets of the past such as Rumi and Bulleh Shah, and lyrics from today’s South Asian popular music, we follow the theme of liminality into a discussion of neither-here-nor-there, conducting a gendered analysis of non-duality.
Following a discussion of the philosophical concepts in the first two sections, the third section of the thesis culminates in a concrete illustration of some of these theoretical notions. Drawing upon ethnographic studies and anthropological writings, we discuss how the theme of liminality is manifested in concrete form in South Asian “third gender” embodiment – those who fail to fit into the binary divisions of male-female, masculine-feminine, man-woman, homosexual-heterosexual.

**Limitations**

Islamic scriptural and metaphysical allusions to the reality and significance of “liminal states” represent a theoretical window left just slightly open by the tradition. The intent of this thesis is to push open that window, allowing for cross-ventilation and room to breathe, and offering us a possibility of a new approach to women and gender studies, one coming from within the wider Islamic socio-religious culture, rather than being superimposed from without. However, there are several limitations to such a thesis. The most glaring limitation is that it does not address issues of law, particularly *shariah* or Islamic law as it relates to conceptions of gender and sexuality. It also does not address the way such issues may be approached in secular versus religious states. Given the current political (patriarchal) climate of war, imperialism, and fear-mongering (especially in regards to “*shariah* law,”) a more comprehensive study would have addressed these aspects as well.

The other obvious limitation in such a study is that it largely leaves out historical context. In conducting a thematic analysis, it does not address issues of time and place within which the theorists being cited operated. For example, it does not bring into
discussion Rumi’s writings for or against homosexuality. It also does not take into account various contemporary conditions in which the subjects live. For example, it leaves out any detailed analysis of Postcoloniality and its effects on the socioeconomic state of hijras in South Asia. Future studies may conduct a more detailed historical analysis, or for example, explore the relevance of Hindu and Buddhist ideas of nonduality to Islamic ideas of liminality.

As with any study, there are limitations of time and space. Given that this was a master’s level thesis rather than a doctoral dissertation, the depth of analysis is limited. Additionally, given the interdisciplinary and thematic nature of the study, the complexity of each theory or philosophical notion leaves the reader with something to be desired. One could easily write a whole dissertation or book on simply two verses of a Sufi poem, yet here for the sake of pragmatism, we are limited to analyzing a group of verses in a few pages. If the study were to continue, it would likely involve further explorations in the Islamic textual sources, along with analysis of fieldwork on third gender identity.

Another perceived limitation is that it is a qualitative rather than quantitative study. In a world in which patriarchal structures of knowledge are idolized, one asks if mixing the poetic with the analytic is “scientific” enough. The stigma attached to the “soft sciences” or the social sciences, leads to the further marginalization of such studies and subject matter. This leads to the evident limitations in regards to the perceived validity and applicability of such studies. The applicability is clearly there – examples include: the rise in “transnational feminist discourse” in Western academia; American development agencies increasingly using qualitative research methods on-the-ground in
places like Afghanistan; Western corporations funding Sufi cultural projects in places like Pakistan, and so on. Yet, we still have a long way to go in bridging the gap between “first world” and “third world,” between policy and practice, between the ivory tower and the real world. Due to the deeply entrenched patriarchal bedrock in every facet of life from academics to government, such studies are discounted. The apparent limitation in the applicability of such research is a result of the perceived devaluing of its validity.

Other limitations include the perpetuation of patriarchal modes of thinking. For example, by rooting the discussion in literature, by beginning with traditional texts, one is maintaining to some extent, the patriarchal value given to the written word, as opposed to beginning with or simply only supporting the argument with examples from the feminine oral tradition. It is reiterating the limited, traditional, patriarchal definition of “text” – text as textbooks excluding the con-text, text as that which is visible rather than also that which is inclusive of the invisible world, text as that which produces information rather than transformation. Lastly, there are obvious limitations as to the extent to which a study can grow organically “from within” rather than “from without.” I do not identify as a third gender, yet I am writing about those who identify as such. And while I identify as a Muslim and lie in the cultural liminality of being a South Asian and an American, my formal education, particularly in the field of women and gender studies, is for all intents and purposes a training in Western disciplines. These are some of the major concerns and limitations of this study which I have been keenly aware of as I wrote this thesis. Perhaps parallel or future research projects could speak to some of these shortcomings.
Ongoing and Future Research

Based on the analysis presented by this thesis, there are several critical recommendations for in-progress and future research projects. There is a much broader significance for the ideas presented here, particularly closer to home geographically. If the conversation had continued, it would go on to discuss the applicability of this analysis to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual/transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) issues here in the West. In fact, given today’s political and academic climate, homosexuality in Islam is already a hot topic. I purposely chose “third gender” rather than homosexuality as the embodiment of barzakh, in order to speak to the underlying issue of dualities, binaries and compartmentalization. However, homosexuality can also be considered a liminal space. Future projects should address: how does the theme of liminality in Islamic thought speak to all those who do not fit neatly into the gender/sex binary? Even if they do not characterize themselves as “third gender,” how are the characteristics of liminality reflected in other “third spaces” and what does that mean in an Islamic context? And on the flip side, if Islamic metaphysical thought pushes for non-duality, allows for a transcendence of rigid labeling and compartmentalizing, then how does that contribute to today’s Western feminist theory and in-turn LGBTQ issues?

Another future research project could tackle the issue of “transnational” labels, or labels crossing borders. Recent interviews on social media outlets evidence South Asian third gender community members verbally identifying themselves as “gay” or “transgender.”154 With the rising effects of globalization, hijras have started to adopt Western labels without fully comprehending – or perhaps un/intentionally redefining –

154 I Am That, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORRuMlH2hk
the hegemonic definitions of the terms. As proven by much of the ethnographic research, given the cultural complexities, including socio-political and historical complexities, one cannot simply use Western labels to describe non-Western compartments – as there is compartmentalization in all regions, but the dynamics and meanings are significantly different. Then, what is the significance when such terms are redefined or re-appropriated?

In addition, future research projects need to more directly engage and reflect on the effects of Islamic metaphysical thought on popular culture in the Muslim world. For example, Jamal Elias’ cornucopia of cultural images, *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan*, has a short section on Sufi poetry embellishing the sides of ornately decorated Pakistani trucks. Arguing for their role as works of moving art, Elias briefly discusses the cultural significance of religion in everyday life, through a book on truck decoration. While this is a more literal example (i.e.: Sufi poetry verses written on trucks), future research projects should explore the effects of Sufi thought on popular culture and everyday life in the Muslim world. Particularly in South Asia, one could conduct many a study on the effects of Sufi poetry and storytelling on the Bollywood film industry. The love stories and song lyrics are palpably rooted in a culture of mysticism, both Hindu and Muslim. An even more recent point of note is the revival of Sufi themed storytelling, particularly in Pakistani television plays called “dramas.” In the past two decades, and more powerfully in the past four or five years, Pakistani women writers are using Sufi themes to deliberately discuss taboo gendered social rights issues through the medium of popular television. These are all future studies that are critically
relevant in the contemporary environment, particularly given the current Western attitude of despair in regards to regions like South Asia.

There are also a few key academics whose on-going works are not directly on the subject of this thesis, but whose topics bear a critical relationship to some of the notions presented here and for future research. Amanullah De Sondy is a rising scholar whose blog *Progressive Scottish Muslims* has gained popularity in recent years. De Sondy’s academic work focuses on the gender construction of men and masculinities in the Islamic tradition, with a particular focus on South Asia.¹⁵⁵ Another scholar is Jasbir Puar, whose work on “terrorist assemblages” and “homonationalism” analyzes the utility of Islamophobia within global queer organizing. For example, the American government’s pretense regarding the plight of Afghans, Persians, Iraqis and Palestinians, while using “look how they treat their gays” as the wild-card in promoting our nationalistic and imperialist agendas.¹⁵⁶

Additionally, Dina Siddiqi’s on-going work on Islamophobia in transnational feminist discourses is critical as we move forward with any research projects combining Islamic thought and feminist ideals. For example, one must be mindful that even the most progressive feminists and activists are vulnerable to adopting the hegemonic Western images of Muslim people and places, and thereby perpetuating neo-liberal and capitalist forms of domination.¹⁵⁷ Additionally, she reiterates the dangers of either leaving men out

¹⁵⁵ http://www.as.miami.edu/religion/faculty/AmanullahDeSondy
of the conversation altogether, or else perpetuating orientalist portrayals of Muslim men such as are commonplace in feminist discourse. In the discussion of Islamophobia in transnational feminist discourse, future research projects must also be mindful of the trap of understanding Islam only within specific geographical boundaries. Given the current political climate, there is a tendency to focus academic research (both financially and intellectually) on the Middle East exclusively. More recently, there has been a blatant tendency to lump together the Middle East and South Asia. And whatever little focus there is on South Asia itself, the majority of nuanced feminist research on this area focuses on India and Hinduism, whereas Pakistan and Muslims are linked almost exclusively to gendered human rights atrocities. For example, the movie Fire portrays the story of a South Asian “lesbian” relationship. Throughout Western feminist discourses, the credit for the movie has been exclusively given to Deepa Mehta, who is an Indian-born Canadian. While Mehta’s work in South Asian cinema is inarguably revolutionary and she has risked her life in bringing to light such taboo topics of gendered human rights violations, what is never pointed out is that her movie Fire was loosely based on a short story written by a Muslim woman, Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991). Chughtai’s work, by any standard falls under feminist studies, yet one would be hard pressed to find her name or her works in Western or transnational feminist discourse.

160 http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00urdu/ismat/index.html
The above are simply a few of the current related research projects that are worthy of note in regards to Islam and gender/feminist studies. In addition, I have presented a few ideas for future research that are not, to my knowledge, currently being pursued. While some research suggestions may seem like logical next steps following this thesis, all of the recommended and parallel projects presented here are critical for answering some of the most burning questions regarding gender and Islam today.
ABBREVIATIONS


Sara Haq Hussaini graduated from Herndon High School, Herndon, Virginia, in 2000. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from George Mason University in 2004. She lived and worked in New York City, her favorite place in the world, before going back to graduate school. Her professional experience includes development work for international nonprofits, including first-hand experience at the United Nations Headquarters. She received her Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies, with a concentration in Women and Gender Studies and a disciplinary focus in Sufism, from George Mason University in 2012.