Performing Sufi Masculinity by Transcending Embodiment in Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s *Kitāb al-Ḥikam*

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Abstract

Through a gendered analysis of Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s (d. 709/1309) *Kitāb al-Ḥikam* (“Book of Wisdom”) this paper demonstrates how the Sufi program offered in the *Ḥikam* prescribes the performance of masculinity through the transcendence of embodiment. Reading the text’s only reference to women as an occurrence of what Jacques Derrida calls textual self-reference, this essay explores how this statement functions as a key to the text’s gender discourse. The explicit reference, supported by evidence from Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s other writings, mirrors the theory of embodiment and gender reflected through the text. This essay illuminates how conceptual descriptions of Sufi spirituality meant to reinforce the importance of transcending embodiment take on gendered meaning when read against explicit comparisons between women, the *nafs* and the *dunyā*. This paper highlights ways in which Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s spiritual instructions encourage the performance of masculinity through the transcendence of embodiment, thus prompting conversations about spiritual cultivation’s groundedness in and reinforcement of normative gender discourses.

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Keywords

Sufism – gender – masculinity – performance – embodiment – textual self-reference – transcendence – immanence – body-denial – renunciation – Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh – Jacques Derrida – Judith Butler

الخلاصة

من خلال تحليل جندري أو جنساني لكاتب الحكم لابن عطاء الله (ت. 1309/678)، توضح هذه الورقة كيف أن المنهج الصوفي المبثوث في الحكم يحدد أداء الرجولية من خلال تجاوز "التجسد" أو الانجباس داخل الجسد. ومن خلال تحليل العبارة الوحيدة في الحكم التي صرحت بذكر النساء، يستكشف هذا المقال كيف تؤدي هذه العبارة وظيفة محورية للخطاب الجندري في النص باعتبارها ظهوراً لما يسميه جاك دريدا المرجع الذاتي النصي. هذه الإشارة الصريحة، التي تظهر أيضاً في كتابات أخرى لابن عطاء الله، تعبر عن نظرية التجسد والجندرية التي يعكسها النص. كما توضح هذه الورقة كيف أن شبكة من المفاهيم في حقل التصوف معنية بتعزيز أهمية تجاوز "التجسد" بمعناه الجندري، وخاصة عندما نقابلها بالمقارنات الصريحة بين مفاهيم النساء والنفس والدنيا. تسلط هذه الورقة الضوء على كيف تشجع تعاليم ابن عطاء الله الروحية على الأداء الرجولي من خلال تجاوز الجسد، وبالتالي فتح الباب لتقاشات حول كون التربية الروحية ذات أصول راسخة في الفهوم المعيارية للجندرية كما أنها تعزز هذا الفهوم في الوقت ذاته.

الكلمات المفتاحية

التصوف – الجندرية – الذكورية – الأداء – التجسد – المرجع الذاتي النصي – التعالي – الحضور – إنكار الجسد – الزهد – ابن عطاء الله – جاك دريدا – جوديث بتلر

1 Introduction

In the *Kitāb al-Ḥikam* ("Book of Wisdom"), Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 709/1309) transmits spiritual guidance that emphasises the imperative to transcend embodiment. Although Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh follows his Shādhilī predecessors in desisting from a purely ascetic approach to Sufi practice, the theory of embodiment explicated in the *Ḥikam* retains ascetic values and rearticulates them as interior spiritual dispositions (Hofer 2014, 145–151; Schimmel 1975, 252). This article is concerned with how the *Ḥikam*'s theory of embodiment is connected to gendered discourses in the text. The main claim is that the spiritual program advanced in the *Ḥikam* prescribes a performance of Sufi

masculinity. Within Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s *oeuvre*, there are several instances where he invokes a common Sufi literary trope in which women are symbols of the material world (*dunyā*) and the ego (*nafs*) and described as spiritual distractions that men must overcome (Schimmel 1997, 69–80). Thus, instructions to transcend embodiment are signified with gendered meaning. Through an examination of discourses of gender and embodiment in Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s writing, and a critical textual analysis of the *Ḥikam*, I argue that transcending embodiment is constructed as a performance of Sufi masculinity.

The gendered nature of Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s advice is captured in one aphorism, which combines parts from two famous *ḥadīths* of the Prophet Muḥammad. The aphorism reads:

Don’t journey from created being to created being
 Or you will be like a donkey at the mill!
 Roundabout he turns, starting and ending in the same place.
 Go from created beings to their Creator.
 ‘Your Lord is your final destination.’
 And consider what the Prophet has said:
 “Whoever undertakes a journey for God and God’s Messenger,
 Such a person’s journey is for God and God’s Messenger.
 And whoever undertakes a worldly journey for marriage with a woman,
 Such a person’s journey is for that object toward which they journey.”

IBN ‘AṬĀ’ ALLĀH 1958, 112

In the first half of this aphorism Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh cites a *ḥadīth* which compares the “devotee without divinity” to “a donkey circling the mill, working hard but getting nowhere” (al-Hujwīrī 2014, 11; Grunebaum 1955, 118). In the second half of the aphorism, he includes the final section of the famous *ḥadīth* of intention, in which the reader is instructed to seek God alone and not mistake marriage with a woman or other worldly activities as their priority (al-Bukhārī 2016, 3).

This aphoristic statement is the only explicit reference to women in the *Ḥikam*, though similar statements appear in Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s other writings, specifically the *Laṭā’if al-Minan* (“Subtle Blessings”), *Tāj al-Arūs* (“The Bridegroom’s Crown”), and the *Kitāb al-Tarwīr* (“The Book of Illumination”).¹ I read it as an example of what Jacques Derrida (d. 2004) calls textual self-reference (Priest, 1994, 104–107). According to Derrida, textual self-reference

1 Whereas men are named in the text (the learned and ignorant man #35 #112, the free man and the slave #63, the forgetful man #114, the humble man #239) this is the only aphorism that specifically names a woman.

occurs because autonomous units within a text hold meaning in reference to all of the other parts of the text (Bradley 2008, 111, 138). In the intratextual economy of the *Hikam*, what is made explicit in one aphorism aids in parsing and understanding other individual aphorisms and the text as a whole, an exegetical method not unsimilar to *tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi-l-Qurʾān* (interpreting the Qurʾān through the Qurʾān) (Priest 1994, 104–106; Bhutta 2017, 9). The presence of similar statements throughout the author's *oeuvre* offers further intertextual support for reading this aphorism as an occurrence of textual self-reference. Interpreting the explicitly gendered aphorism as a moment of textual self-reference, we can unlock what Judith Butler calls the “matrix of intelligibility,” that is, the code of discursive terminology, concepts, and symbols that define and delimit gender and sexuality within a particular context (Butler 1999, 17). For Butler, gender is not a substance but rather a constructed identity that is constituted through particular “acts” and processes of embodiment. Reading the explicit reference to women as the key to the *Hikam*'s matrix of intelligibility, it becomes possible to extend the gender analysis of this passage to the text as a whole. Since the explicit reference symbolically links women and the feminine with embodiment and men and the masculine with the imperative and potential to transcend embodiment, I read the text through this gendered matrix of intelligibility. Wherever the author advises the reader to transcend embodiment, to detach from it, ignore it, or dominate it through various practices and dispositions, I read this as a prescription to perform masculinity. Implicit references to gender can be noted by their way of mirroring the theological hierarchy expressed in the explicit reference, by invoking embodiment and materiality as impediments to spirituality. This advice applies both to the material world as a whole and the individual body. At one level, the reader is instructed to detach from materiality and master it by, “seeing it for what it is,” which leads to a kind of apathy toward it or domination over it. This gendered dynamic is also mapped onto the individual. Instructions to disregard the body, to dominate it, or to detach from it are thus instructions to perform masculinity by affirming the transcendent aspect of the human being and dismantling embodied attachment and identity.

This paper argues that the *Hikam* prescribes the performance of Sufi masculinity through the transcendence of embodiment using two kinds of evidence. First, references to multiple writings by Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh confirm a disposition of body-denial was part of his approach to Sufism. Here the term body-denial signifies the interiorisation and intellectualisation of ascetic ideals, foregrounding transcendence and resisting embodiment. I also examine Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh's ideas as connected to the contemporary emergence of philosophical Sufism in the 13th–14th century and the polemical tensions surrounding the

figure Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) (Hofer 2014, 105–178; Mohamed 2013, 43). I then contextualise the gendered aspects of Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s theory of embodiment within the broader history of Sufism, reviewing contemporary scholarship on Sufism, embodiment, and gender (Schimmel 1997, chapt. 4; Cornell 2007). Second, I provide a critical textual analysis of the *Ḥikam* using Derrida’s theory of textual self-reference and Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity. I analyse the literary constructions in the explicit reference to gender in the *Ḥikam* illuminating how it prefigures gender performativity in the text. This section reveals how the gendered social hierarchy Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh uses to teach transcending embodiment in the one explicit reference to women, is implicitly mirrored throughout the *Ḥikam*. I show how implicit references reinforce the author’s devaluation of embodied phenomena, the dynamic of mastery and dominance over embodiment in general, and the projection of this gendered dynamic onto the human individual. This paper highlights ways in which Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s spiritual instructions encourage the performance of masculinity through the transcendence of embodiment, thus prompting conversations about spiritual cultivation’s groundedness in and reinforcement of normative gender discourses.

2 Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh, The Shādhiliya and the *Kitāb al-Ḥikam*

2.1 *The Shādhiliya*

Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh was the third master in the Shādhiliya Sufi lineage, following its founder, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī (d. 656/1258) and his successor, Abū al-‘Abbās al-Mursī (d. 686/1287) (Douglas 1948, 286; Mackeen 1971, 485; Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 1978, trans. Danner, 25; Geoffroy 1998).² Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh is the first Shaykh in the Shādhilī Sufi Order to formally record the central teachings of the *ṭarīqa* and is largely responsible for constructing the identity of the Shādhiliya as a cohesive institution (Hofer, 2014, chapters 4–6). As Nathan Hofer argued, by authoring a hagiography of his predecessors, *Laṭā’if al-Minan*, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh secured widespread validation for his succession as Shaykh. In doing so, he also put his own stamp on the identity of the nascent *ṭarīqa*. (Hofer 2014: 129). Through this hagiography, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh inscribes an interesting tension concerning embodiment and materiality into the identity of the *ṭarīqa*. The Shādhiliya is popularly described as distinct from earlier trends in Sufism because al-Shādhilī and al-Mursī did not practice asceticism. Despite mandating

2 Although the long held academic position has been that neither al-Shādhilī nor al-Mursī composed written works has recently come into question (Touati 2018, 228–229).

participation in ordinary life, including employment, regular dress and comportment, marriage, and some degree of affiliation with state power, it would be a mistake to assert that body-denial and renunciation of the material world were not central to al-Shādhilī, al-Mursī, and Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh.

The first way the *Laṭā’if* cemented body-denial into the Shādhiliya was by framing the narrative of al-Shādhilī’s saintly authority. Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh claims that al-Shādhilī did not need a formal *silsila* because he had attained spiritual authority directly from the God through ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661) and the Prophet Muḥammad (Hofer 2014, 135). Hofer cites from the *Laṭā’if al-Minan* where Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh recalls the words of al-Shādhilī:

This method (*ṭarīqa*) of ours is not connected to any from the East nor to any from the West. Rather, [we trace it] from one individual after another to al-Ḥasan ibn ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, who was the first *quṭb*. But enumerating the *shaykhs* of one’s path (*ṭarīq*) is required only for those whose method involves wearing the *khirqā* ... [However,] God might bring the servant [directly] to him and he will not need a teacher. [In that case,] God will join [the Sufi] to the prophet and [the latter] will authorise [the former] ... So if God wants to favour a servant, he will make it so that he does not need a teacher and he will have no precedent (*salāf*).

HOFER 2014, 135

Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh claims that al-Shādhilī’s direct connection to God vis-à-vis the prophet precluded his need of any *silsila* connecting him to living, embodied, authorities. A direct connection and reliance on God then becomes a feature of the Shādhiliya’s brand of interiorised renunciation and body-denial. Al-Shādhilī’s disregard for an embodied *silsila* sets a precedent for maintaining a critical distance from materiality. This precedent is, in turn, carried through the teachings of al-Mursī and Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh.³ For instance, an entire chapter of the *Laṭā’if* addresses how al-Mursī practiced detachment from the world, eschewing involvement with other people, even other Sufis (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 2005, trans. Roberts, 151–186). In this chapter, entitled, “On his knowledge, his renunciation, his abstinence, his detachment from the world, his forbearance, his long-suffering and the rightness of his path,” al-Mursī is cited saying he “is

3 Hofer notes that later historical writings suggest that al-Shādhilī had taken a *khirqā madyanīya* through an Egyptian Abū al-Hajjāj Yūsuf al-Uḡsurī (d. 642/1244) upon entering Egypt (Hofer 2015, 117). However, this was a retroactive insertion to the Shaykh’s story and a literary act intended to make al-Shādhilī’s narrative fit the mold of more conventional Sufi lineages. Hofer cites Denis Gril who said no such *khirqā madyanīya* existed at that time (Hofer 2014, 133).

more conversant with the ways of Heaven than he is with the ways of Earth" (Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 2005, trans. Roberts, 151).

Second, Hofer explains, since al-Shādhilī did not receive a worldly initiation he did not practice the donning of a *khirqā* or *muraqqa'a* like other Sufi ascetics (Hofer 2014, 133). In fact, he forbid his students to do so preferring that they dress according to their social station (Hofer 2014, 145). While this has sometimes been read as world-affirming, the reasoning behind this advice further emphasises a dissociation from the world. Al-Shādhilī shuns the practice of wearing ascetic clothing because it implies turning to human beings to fulfil a need, when one should only ever seek directly from God (Hofer 2014, 146).

This advice to blend in among ordinary people is taken further by the Shaykh in the requirement to retain employment and support a family. At first glance, this may appear to be world affirming, but I extend Hofer's notion of an ethos of Malāmatism⁴ in rejecting ascetic dress to the practice of participation in ordinary life (Hofer 2015, 147). Furthermore, participating in the world through breadwinning, food, and marriage, were not taught as methods for finding God in the world. Rather, blending in with common people was a method to train the *naḥs* against attachment to the world. In the *Laṭā'if*, al-Shādhilī explains, "truly, when you renounce it [this worldly life] you glorify it" (Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 2005, trans. Roberts, 22). Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh then affirms this guidance in a poetic teaching written for his student, "It is right and good that you should abandon this entire [earthly] existence, Ḥasan, so let nothing distract you from this intent. Yet if you have true understanding, you will know there can be no abandonment of that which has no existence" (Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 2005, trans. Roberts, 227). Foregoing formal asceticism is therefore a method for making renunciation genuine. This might be called a renunciation of renunciation itself.

Instructing students to participate in the world was also balanced by a kind of complete and direct reliance on God. The *Kitāb al-Tanwīr* is where this complete reliance (*tawwakul*) is most fully articulated by Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh in conjunction with the requirement to cease self-direction (*tadbīr*). The first half of the text teaches that "those who want to draw near to God while still working must leave, abandon, and be purified of self-reliance and any struggle against their fate" (Hofer 2015, 148), offering practical ways to cultivate this inward disposition of total reliance on God and ceasing to rely on oneself, other people, or

4 Here, I follow Hofer in the use of the term Malāmatism and refer to the phenomenon according to the definition of Sara Sviri who explains: "*Malāmāṭiyya* represents an extremely introverted reaction to extroverted ascetic forms of spirituality (*zuḥd*)" (Sviri 1999, 1). For the purposes of this paper, Malāmatism refers to the practice of concealing one's piety and the renunciation of outward signs of spiritual superiority of affiliation.

other worldly forces. According to Hofer, the second half of the text teaches the reader how to remain working in the world while maintaining exclusive focus on God.

Contrary to affirmations of God's immanent presence in the world, these teachings were methods to make *fuqarā'* invisible to the public such that their spiritual identity as Sufis did not become another layer of earthly attachment and identity in need of renunciation. As Hofer says, these were practices that actually confirmed the relentless focus on the *bāṭin*. Hofer explains, "Unlike much of the prior Sufi tradition that emphasised a direct link between inner states (*bāṭin*) and outer appearances (*ẓāhir*), al-Shādhilī takes a completely different tack by severing the outer from the inner. The only comportment that truly matters is the *bāṭin*" (Hofer 2015, 146). Following Hofer's lead, the very teachings of al-Shādhilī that are cited as evidence that he did not instruct renunciation and body-denial offer proof that he actually took them to deeper and more subtle level.

2.2 The Hikam

The *Kitāb al-Hikam* is a famous collection of spiritual aphorisms most commonly read by Sufi practitioners as a work of spiritual guidance and by scholars as an example of the emergence of theoretical Sufism in the 13th and 14th centuries (Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 1958; Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 1978, trans. Danner; McGregor 1997, 256). The *Hikam* is read in many Sufi orders and has been the subject of elaborate commentaries by Sufi teachers around the globe, from the time shortly after Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh's death continuing to our present day.⁵ The *Hikam* has been treated historically as the foremost articulation of Shādhilī Sufi teachings (Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 1978, trans. Danner, 29) or its *madhhab* (Mohamed 2013, 41–42).

In the *Hikam*, Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh transmits a vision of Sufism centred around the practice of invocatory prayer and meditation (*dhikr*), the virtue of detachment from the material world (*dunyā*), relinquishing self-direction (*tadbīr*), and trust in God (*tawakkul*). Scholars disagree on the question of Ibn 'Arabī's influence on Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh. Eric Geoffroy and Richard McGregor believe they can trace some historical contact and conceptual influence, whereas Abū al-Wafā al-Taftāzānī and Paul Nwyia do not believe there is evidence of such a lineage (Geoffroy 1999, 83; Geoffroy 1995, 470; al-Taftāzānī 1958, 46–47; Nwyia 1972, 4). Geoffroy claims the influence of Ibn 'Arabī in three ways: (1) the

5 Ibn 'Abbād al-Rundī (d. 793/1390); Aḥmad Zarrūq (d. 899/1493); Aḥmad Ibn 'Ajība (d. 1224/1809); Shaykh Ramaḍān al-Būtī (d. 1434/2013) to name only a few of the available sources. Samia Touati estimates in her dissertation a total of 49 commentaries in prose, 8 in verse, and seven in audio-visual mediums (see Touati 2014, 289–297).

historical encounters between the Shādhiliya and Akbarian figures mentioned by Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh in the *Laṭā’if*;⁶ (2) Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s explicit use of Akbarian terminology such as ‘*ayn thābita*’ (immutable entities), ‘*ayn mumkināt*’ (possible entities); (3) the conceptual references to the doctrine of the *waḥdat al-wujūd* implied in several of Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s aphorisms from the *Ḥikam* such as “That which shows you the existence of His Omnipotence is that He veiled you from Himself by what has no existence alongside of Him” (Geoffroy 1999, 83). Geoffroy also notes that Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh and several Shādhilī Sufis after him including, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) and his Shaykh Muḥammad al-Maghribī (d. 910/1504) were defenders of the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī in the face of his exoteric, legalistic detractors (Geoffroy 1999; Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 1978, trans. Danner, 15).

Although I agree with scholars that the *Ḥikam* closely integrates the metaphysics of Ibn ‘Arabī and early Sufi thought (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 1978, trans. Danner, 15, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 1996, trans. Khoury-Danner 1996, 8, 20), recent work on Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh reveals why he may have been keen to conceal the Akbarian influences on his Sufi teachings. Since theoretical or “philosophical” Sufism emerged subsequent to Ibn ‘Arabī, it is Geoffroy’s view that whoever does not find Ibn ‘Arabī to have influenced Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh must read him as teaching a Sufism of spiritual virtues (*al-taṣawwuf al-akhlāqī*) rather than philosophical Sufism (*al-taṣawwuf al-falsafī*) (Geoffroy 1995, 470). Recent studies on Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh highlight how his dual roles as Sufi shaykh and legal scholar of the Mansūriyya Mosque and al-Azhar in Cairo, influenced how he presented Sufism to the public. To retain and expand his platform, he made Sufism palatable to the broad public he reached through weekly sermons (Hofer 2015, 166). This influenced his presentation of theology and cosmology. For instance, Mohamed Mosaad Abdelaziz Mohamed highlights the way Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh engages with the metaphysical and cosmological ideas of Ibn ‘Arabī, while being extremely

6 Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh cites a meeting between al-Shādhilī and Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 672/1274), the major proponent of the Akbarian school after Ibn ‘Arabī himself. Ahmed Shafik also supports the notion of a relationship between Ibn ‘Arabī and the Shādhilī *ṭarīqa vis-a-vis* the Shaykh of al-Shādhilī, Abū Madyān. He notes that in his *Risālat al-Quds* (“Epistle on Holiness”), Ibn ‘Arabī mentions a spiritual rather than physical meeting with Shaykh Abū Madyān as well as interactions with Sufis and Sufi Shaykhs who were themselves the students of Shaykh Abū Madyān. Moreover, Shafik finds that Ibn ‘Arabī cites Shaykh Abū Madyān more than any other Shaykh. Ahmed acknowledges that the founders of the Shādhiliya themselves were not practitioners of theoretical Sufism, but notes that the Shādhiliya Sufis become proponents of theoretical Sufism when they became influenced by Ibn ‘Arabī in the 13th century. In Shafik’s view, the shared history of the Akbarians and Shādhilīs ought to be recognised without oversimplifying their similarities and clear differences (see Shafik 2009, 128–131).

careful not to condone pantheism (Mohamed 2013). Mohamed believes that while Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh adopted and used some of the ideas of Ibn 'Arabī, he was careful to refashion them in the language of *fiqh* or through the more palatable discourses of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) (Mohamed 2013, 50).

In Mohamed's analysis of Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh, we find evidence that he was concerned to project an image of his Sufi path that prioritised common, conventional, legalistic frameworks. I also believe Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh hinted toward this manoeuvre in aphorism 184, which states, "Whoever has been given permission to speak out will find that his expression is understood by his listeners and that his symbolic allusion is clear to them" (Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 1978, trans. Danner, 94). Here he insinuates that knowledge can be verified as authentic and valid if it is easy to understand. This gives us reason to believe that he was deeply concerned with making Sufism conventional, commonplace, and accessible, beyond contemporary polemics. He also explains that sharing knowledge attained through a particular spiritual state might be confusing to those who have not reached the same experience. In aphorism 188 he states, "Sometimes the one who draws near to a station expresses himself about it, and sometimes the one who is united with it expresses himself about it. That is confusing save to those who has insight" (Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 1978, trans. Danner, 94).

Mohamed links Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh's efforts to teach Sufism in an accessible manner to his careful presentation of divine immanence, the contemporary controversy surrounding the infamous Ibn 'Arabī, and the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* associated with him (Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 1978, trans. Danner, 25–26). For example, Mohamed cites Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh's treatise on the divine name Allāh (*qaṣd al-mujarrad*), his primer on the practice of *dhikr* (*Miftāḥ al-Falāḥ*) and the *Laṭā'if* to confirm that Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh was particularly careful when describing God as the divine immanent (Mohamed 2013). Whereas Ibn 'Arabī was known to discuss God as both the absolutely transcendent and absolutely immanent, when discussing how human beings acquire divine attributes, Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh emphasises that they were mere similitudes to God's own attributes. Thus, he adds distance not only between immanence and materiality, but between immanence and human manifestations of divine qualities. This maintained that God's immanent presence remained transcendent and non-embodied. His strategy was to invoke Ibn 'Arabī's ideas, but foreground divine transcendence in his presentation and pedagogy.

Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh's *Ḥikam* embraces the notion of divine immanence and in some instances even suggests that to witness God through embodied phenomena is an extremely elevated state. However, this does not mean that Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh's theory of embodiment foregrounds the immanent presence of God

within creation. There always remains a critical distance between God's immanence and materiality. Bodies remain inferior to the transcendent principle that underlies their existence. For instance, he writes in aphorism 246,

The cosmos envelops you in respect to your corporeal nature but it does not do so in respect to the immutability of your spiritual nature. So long as the domains of the invisible worlds have not been revealed to him, the creature in the cosmos is imprisoned by his surroundings and confined in the temple of his nature.

IBN 'AṬĀ' ALLĀH 1978, trans. DANNER, 107

Therefore, the corporeal aspects of the world and the human being are not integrated with divine immanence, but shells which contain an immanent presence.

Expressed differently, Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh explains, "If not for God's manifestations in created things, eyesight would not reach them. And if not for the manifestation of God's attributes, created things would disappear" (Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 1958, 129). Therefore, created things are just illusory material forms that highlight what is hidden within them. They have no value in and of themselves without God's manifesting in them and making them visible. Here, divine immanence is not presented as the divine integration with the materiality of created things, but as God's transcendent presence illuminating the ultimately non-existent created things. It is questionable whether such a vision of divine immanence is in fact immanence, or if it remains a vision of the animating function of God's transcendence. For this reason, in my analysis I deal more emphatically with the dynamic between transcendence and embodiment, rather than transcendence and immanence. These lines from the *Ḥikam* and insights from Mohamed remind us that in Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh's historical context, there was significant tension surrounding Ibn 'Arabī and accusations of pantheism that may have limited how he presented divine immanence in the *Ḥikam*.

While we do not know what Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh taught his students privately, due to his unique position as a resident scholar of both the Maṣūriyya Mosque and al-Azhar he was careful to publicly articulate his brand of Sufism in a way that protected him and his *ṭarīqa* from claims of pantheism (Danner 1978, 25). This is, of course, attested to by other scholars of Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh such as Sherman Jackson, who named his translation of *Tāj al-'Arūs* "Sufism for Non-Sufis" (Jackson 2012).

Both the narrative framework in which he constructed the identity of the Shādhiliyya *ṭarīqa* and his extremely careful engagement with Ibn 'Arabī help to explain how and why Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh foregrounds divine transcendence in

his pedagogy. In the text, the transcendent aspect of God has a functional role; it is invoked to help the seeker detach from the material world and physical embodiment. While divine immanence is present in Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s theology, it is not used pedagogically to evoke change in the reader. Divine immanence is not where one begins the path.

Despite the historical relevance of the *Ḥikam* and its continued use in popular Muslim piety, it has not received much critical textual examination in the modern academy (Hoesterey 2016, 152; Geoffroy 2005; Cook 2017, 40). Recent scholarship from Hofer, Samia Touati, Mohamed, and Abu Bakr Sirrajudin Cook has helped to advance projects on Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh. However, contemporary scholarship has not yet addressed the question of gender in either the *Ḥikam* specifically or more generally, in Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s Sufi program of spiritual development.

3 Sufism, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh, and Gender

In many historical examples, Sufis of merit are described through masculine imagery. Women advanced on the Sufi path such as Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya (d. 185/801) were described as “walking on the path of God like a man” or as Shāh ‘Abd al-Laṭīf Bhittā’ī (d. 1165/1752) said “he who seeks the Lord is male” (‘Aṭṭār 2009, trans. Losensky, 97; Dakake 2002, 117–138; Cornell 2019, 288; De Soudy 2014, 156). In many ways, Rābi‘a’s ascetic rejection of her female embodiment, exemplified by her refusal to marry or have sex, are connected to her representation in literature as an exceptional woman who was able to “walk like a man.” She was notable specifically because she transcended her embodiment, which men were apparently more capable to do. In her recent work on Rābi‘a, Rkia Cornell refers to this gendered vision of the world as feminine using Jacques Maquet’s (d. 2013) World/Non-World dichotomy (Cornell 2019, 84–87, 288). She explains that the trope implying that spiritually-advanced women “walked like men” or “became male” was grounded in a worldview that claimed “the ideal spiritual state (the Nonworld) is masculine and the lesser, non-spiritual state (the World) is feminine. If this were not the case, then why could a woman on the path of God not be called a ‘woman?’” (Cornell 2019, 288). If we read this metaphor more closely, men are comparable to the transcendent spirit (*rūḥ*) that must not become ensnared by the ruses of women, symbols of the material world (*dunyā*).

This paradigm is similarly invoked by Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh in a story from the *Laṭā’if* in which a saintly woman experiences the divine presence so extremely that her husband cannot access her sexually, even though she does nothing to

prevent him. He expresses frustration by this fact and she says, “so which of us is the man and which is the woman?” (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 2005, trans. Roberts, 277). Here, conventional gender discourse is blurred: her removal from the ordinary conditions of embodiment imbibes her with a masculine transcendence, while her husband’s desire for her body is invoked as a sign of his feminine worldliness. Therefore, if the capacity to transcend embodiment is gendered masculine, and embodiment and attachment to the body is gendered feminine, both men and women on the Sufi path perform masculinity when they take conscious steps to detach from embodiment.

This kind of gendered imagery has precedence in earlier Sufi and Islamic thought as well. Scholars have done gendered readings of Islamic literature, Qur’ān commentary, and Sufi texts critical of these hierarchically gendered dynamics (Badran 2009, chapter 7; De Soudy 2015, 154; Shaikh 1997, 59), and others have uncritically accepted gendered hierarchy as a natural fact of Sufi thought (Murata 1992, 185).

Annemarie Schimmel found this paradigm in many examples of Sufi literature. She explains, “as every individual woman can be looked upon as the personification of the *nafs* and thus can be despised and scorned by the “men of God,” so too can the world, *dunyā* (whose grammatical gender just happens to be feminine, as well) be represented as a woman” (Schimmel 1997, 7). The same literary trope was explored by Cornell, who found a direct association between women, embodiment, animality, and irrationality permeated the Ḥadīth tradition and medieval Islamic literature (Cornell 2007, 257). In both Schimmel and Cornell’s scholarship, the equivocation between women and the *dunyā* is conveyed through the personification of woman as *nafs*, but more specifically and significantly, as *al-nafs al-amārra bi-l-sū’* (the self that commands to evil) or *al-nafs al-lawwāma* (the blameworthy self) and not *al-nafs al-muṭma’inna* (the tranquil self). Cornell writes that comparing women to the *nafs* (*al-nafs al-ammāra bi-l-sū’*) is “a trope to symbolise the world and its temptations. As such, it is compared to a woman, who, by her ruses, tries to ensnare the higher soul (*rūḥ*) and bring it down to the level of worldly life” (Cornell 2007, 259).

There are examples within Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s own writings in which he uses this kind of patriarchal Sufi imagery. Eric Geoffroy concurs with this statement, noting that Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh did not transcend the patriarchal and often misogynistic images commonly referenced in his contemporary society (Touati 2014, 67). For instance, Touati notes how in Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s *Tāj al-Arūs* he cites a teaching of al-Mursī that states, “the soul is comparable to a woman: the more you go after her the more she goes after you. Entrust her than to your Lord who’ll do with her whatever He wants, since if you exhaust yourself trying to educate her, she will not submit to you” (Touati 2014, 67).

Similarly, in the *Kitāb al-Tanwīr*, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh uses the Qur’ānic story of Adam and Eve to elaborate his teachings on relinquishing self-direction. Here he says that the Tree of knowledge of good and evil is a symbol for *tadbīr*, eating from it being equivalent to taking life into one’s own hands rather than leaving all things to God. Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh explains here that while God treated both Adam and Eve with special restraint and acquainted them both with the divine quality of “careful concealment” by revealing their nudity to them, this occasion also verified the special selection of Adam, since he turned in repentance to God with such ease (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 2005, trans. Kugle, 110). He goes on, however, to explicitly compare Eve to the *nafs*. He states,

Take this as a warning! You should see Adam’s tree in each thing that God has forbidden you. You should realize that paradise is nothing but the intimate presence of God. It is said that Adam is your heart, while Eve is your ego. From this perspective understand this moment of Divine Speech: *Do not either of you approach this tree, or you will both be among the oppressive transgressors*. However, Adam was surrounded and protected by divine care, such that when he ate of the tree, the consequence was that he descended into the world as God’s vice-regent. But consider yourself, do you have any such protection? If you eat of the forbidden tree, you will descend into the world of separation and alienation from the divine presence. Consider this deeply and understand.

If you eat of the forbidden tree, you will be expelled from the paradise of concord into a world of alienation. Your heart will be encumbered with burdens and wearied with toils. At the moment of alienation from God’s presence, it is your heart that experiences ardor and weariness, not your ego. This is because the ego selfishly takes delight in sensual pleasures and greedily desires during the sojourn of alienation into the world of separation from the divine presence. The ego is foolishly engrossed in its own heedless passions.

IBN ‘AṬĀ’ ALLĀH 2005, trans. Kugle, 114–15

Here, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh exemplifies a gendered theology that imagines men are more capable of transcending embodiment and bodily limitations, and women are destined to succumb to their lowest instincts and animalistic desires.

Kugle notes that in the *Kitāb al-Tanwīr*, God is described through masculine, patriarchal imagery:

In Arabic, the conventions of grammar reinforce a series of mythic images, with little rational ordering, that make up the basics of Islamic

theology. The grammatical gender that language assigns to these spiritual forces takes on meaning in the mutual relationship of these forces, rather than in any reification of God as a masculine being. It must be admitted, however, that Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh offers metaphors for God’s nature that explicitly compare God to a masculine person: a man, the head of a patriarchal household who owns slaves, or a king ... However, to Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh, like most Muslim theologians and Sufis in the medieval period, these images were drawn from social reality: they provided immediate and forceful (if not unavoidable) ways of talking about the power and authority of God.

IBN ‘AṬĀ’ ALLĀH 2005, trans. KUGLE 2005, 374

Zahra Ayubi finds that in the tradition of Islamic ethics, virtues are described through imagery of men, men’s professional and social roles, and character traits deemed “masculine” (Ayubi 2019, 80). She documents this as it appears in the writings of al-Ghazālī, whose major influence on Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh is cited above. She writes, “Ghazālī contrasts rationality with the baseness of animals as well as the ‘weakness and vulnerability of women.’ Thus, the rational, intellectual faculty (*‘aql*) to reign over the bestial and savage faculties (*shahwa* and *ghaḍab*) is a male expression of power” (Ayubi 2019, 79).⁷ Ayubi explains, “descriptions of the virtues and vices reads like a study in ideal masculinity because of the examples given, but also because of the rhetoric of superiority that is articulated in patriarchal terms of responsibility and God’s vicegerency (*khlāfa*). As a result, the science of *akhlāq* excludes all nonelite men, whom the ethicists do not understand as having the ability to subdue their animalistic faculties and vices and embody justice” (Ayubi 2019, 85).

Gendered analysis of Islamic texts from multiple genres highlights the prevalence of hierarchical paradigm juxtaposing women and embodiment with men and transcendence. In the following sections, I show how the *Ḥikam* exhibits this paradigm in its gendered theory of embodiment, and how transcending embodiment can thus be read as way to become masculine or perform masculinity

4 Gender Performativity and Critical Methodology

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity is useful in the present study of the *Ḥikam* because it emphasises how gender identity is constituted through a process of embodiment. Butler unravels the assumption that there is some

⁷ The transliteration has been modified to correspond to the style of this journal.

inherent ‘substance’ connecting human biology and gender identity and critically explores the ways in which gender is socially constructed and constituted through acts that signify gendered meaning within a “matrix of intelligibility” (Butler 1999, 23–24). Butler argues that “a phenomenological theory of constitutions requires an expansion of the conventional view of acts to mean both that which constitutes meaning and that through which meaning is performed or enacted” (Butler 2004, 902). For Butler, gender becomes constituted within a *process of embodiment* rather than through a paradigm of fixed bodily identities. Genders are constituted by acting in a particular “theatrical context” or upon a metaphorical “stage” in which specific performative acts ‘mean’ or ‘constitute’ a specific gender identity (Butler 1999, xxv; Butler 1988, 521). Butler views gender as constituted through embodied ‘acts,’ which are themselves informed by culturally constructed meaning, based on the “matrix of intelligibility” in which they are understood.

Butler shows that without an awareness of the “matrix of intelligibility,” one might assume that some bodies, identities, words, and concepts were inherently “masculine” or “feminine,” but that such an assumption is not informed by the influence of culture upon the formation of gender. Thus, the matrix of intelligibility makes sense or meaning of genders and then prescribes certain ‘acts’ to specific gender identities. It is by ‘performing’ these acts and thus, ‘embodying’ a gender identity, that individuals ‘constitute’ their own gender identity (Butler 1999, xxix, 178–179).

Reading for gender in the *Hikam* using Derrida’s concept of textual self-reference and Butler’s notion of performativity is therefore a process of determining: (1) which acts are associated with constituting specific gender identities and (2) how the performance of those ‘acts’ is a process of embodying a gender identity that carries a specific meaning in the ‘theatrical context,’ in this case a Sufi path imagined in the *Hikam*. Here I argue that acts of devaluing, detaching form, ignoring, or dominating embodied phenomena are methods for performing masculinity, which is defined by the transcendence of embodiment.

5 Explicit Gender Reference within the *Hikam*

Within the *Hikam* I have found only one aphorism that explicitly references women.⁸ This aphorism, number 42 in the collection, combines parts of two *hadith* sayings. This passage juxtaposes donkeys and women, created beings

⁸ There are four treatises appended to the *Hikam* and within one of them is a reference to ‘Ā’isha (d. 58/678), the daughter of Abū Bakr (d. 13/634). I have not counted it since it is not

and women, and compares men distracted from God by women to donkeys whose work in the world is futile. It states:

Don't journey from created being to created being
 Or you will be like a donkey at the mill!
 Roundabout he turns, starting and ending in the same place.
 Go from created beings to their Creator.
 'Your Lord is your final destination.'
 And consider what the Prophet has said:
 "Whoever undertakes a journey for God and God's Messenger,
 Such a person's journey is for God and God's Messenger.
 And whoever undertakes a worldly journey for marriage with a woman,
 Such a person's journey is for that object toward which they journey."

IBN 'AṬĀ' ALLĀH 1958, 112⁹

In this aphorism, Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh references a *ḥadīth* which states that a person without God is like a donkey tethered to a millstone, he walks and is works but gets nowhere (al-Hujwīrī 2014, 11; Grunebaum 1955, 118). Donkeys are well-known symbols of irrationality and animality and a common invective in Arabic literature (Stetkevych 1986, 105). The comparison between donkeys and women has been made elsewhere, such as in a *ḥadīth* which says that if a donkey, woman, or dog walk past a person in prayer, they must remake it (Barazangi 2016, 56). Here, Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh compares the person who finds meaning in the material world to a donkey, who moves from created being to

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written in the body of the text or in the same aphoristic genre as the *Ḥikam* and therefore creates meaning in a completely different register (see Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 1978, trans. Danner, 115).

- 9 Here, donkeys and women are compared as symbols of worldliness and spiritual distraction. The juxtaposition is articulated through the construction of a literary ring (Cuypers 2015, 67–69) and as a dualistic, oppositional parallelism (Lawson 2008, 27) within the aphorism. These literary constructions are both common semantic features of the Qur'ān, which Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh would likely have known as an expert scholar of Qur'ān and Arabic language. The matrix of intelligibility through which Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh constructs gendered norms and the performativity of masculinity in the text is established through this juxtaposition. In their most basic form, ring structures are presented as (ABC/C'B'A), a concentric construction in which the outer units mirror each other and contain within the centre units the main message of the complete construction. Michael Cuypers has found that wherever ring composition is present, the outer units express an historically specific message whereas the inner unit generally presents a message of universal and ethical significance (Cuypers 2015, 35). Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh was both a master of the Arabic language and the Qur'ān, in which duality and opposition are common semantic constructions used to establish a matrix or lexicon of meaning in the absence of a consistent linear narrative (Lawson 2008, 31).

created being, but gets nowhere. Therefore, one can undertake a journey that is futile if it is fixed in the world.

The second *ḥadīth*, the *ḥadīth* of intention compares those who are worldly and distracted from God with those who are focused on marriage with a woman.¹⁰ Reading these two *ḥadīths* juxtaposed together as a single aphorism shows a parallel between “created beings” and women, which become synonymous with the materiality of the *dunyā* and limitations of the body. Both are invoked as distractions to the reader, presumably a man, who must transcend them in order to focus on their Creator. This aphorism delineates a matrix of intelligibility defining and delimiting gender, through its discursive allusions to women, donkeys, created beings, and the futility of life in the material world.

5.1 *Performing Masculinity by Transcending Embodiment*

Through the use of a dualistic oppositional parallelism, we can go further into the dynamics of the aphorism. As with many literary parallelisms and oppositions, in this aphorism there is an unstated and implicit piece: masculinity. For instance, we can infer that the presumed reader is a man who finds himself positioned in a world of embodied distractions, symbolised by the desire for sex with a woman or a donkey’s worldly work. While the complimentary parallelism relates and negatively connotes embodied existence (created beings), women, irrationality and worldliness (the donkey), even without an explicit mention of masculinity, it is semantically present through the dualism of the literary structure (Lawson 2008, 31). Lawson tells us that dualities appear both explicitly and implicitly, and when they appear implicitly it may be that one term in a dualistic pair might be made explicit, in this case woman, which draws the mind to complete the conceptual syzygy “through its own ‘fluent logic’ of the imagination” (Lawson 2008, 31–32). Therefore, just as femininity is described as something to be excised from oneself, masculinity is affirmed as a quality to embody (paradoxically by transcending embodiment). Therefore, while a connection between embodiment and the feminine is made

10 Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh selects a specific rendering of the *ḥadīth* of intention. Whereas the *ḥadīth* is commonly recorded saying “*ilā imra’a yankiḥuhā*” using the verbal form of the term *nikāḥ* which means the act of sex presumed within a contractual marriage, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh distances himself from this explicitly embodied act by writing instead “*ilā imra’a yatazawwijuhā*” using the verbal form of the word *zawj* meaning partner or contractually married spouse. Therefore, even in this subtle manoeuvre of selecting the rendering of “marriage,” he has tried to present Sufi wisdom through the conventional language of legal contracts. This puts some distance between his teachings and the embodied materiality of the world he is describing.

explicit, the connection between masculinity and transcending embodiment is implied.

In the centre of the aphorism, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh encourages the reader to focus completely on God, saying “Your lord is your final destination.” Here, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh points toward the possibility of finding God somewhere beyond the realm of embodiment, namely in the presence of the divine transcendent. Gendered theologies not only describe spiritual obstacles through metaphors about women, they also emphasise aspects of God that have been associated with masculinity. Sa’diyya Shaikh argues that patriarchal theologies emphasise divine transcendence and “distant, autocratic images of God” while foregrounding “hierarchical modes of power between men and men and men and women” (Shaikh 2015, 96). She also notes that these kinds of patriarchal theologies are also known to “denigrate materiality and by extension, women, whom they primarily identify with the body and bodily principles” (Shaikh 2015, 96).

The basic structure of this aphorism also conveys its central teaching, to transcend embodiment. Note how references to embodied spiritual impediments stand on the outer limits of this aphorism, while “Your Lord is your final destination” separates them at the centre. This visually replicates the notion that embodied phenomena such as those references in the outer ring of the aphorism are a valueless shell compared to the transcendent message they conceal.

This aphorism points toward the paradigmatic priority to foreground divine transcendence over and above divine immanence. It is precisely through this kind of theological and cosmological discourse that Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh expresses a theory of gender in the *Hikam*. Therefore, instructions to distance oneself from embodiment are rooted in gendered ideas. Just as advice to detach from women signifies a body-denying approach to Sufism, emphasis on God’s distant, transcendent aspect signifies a preference and emphasis on cultivating masculinity as a spiritual practice. Thus, the articulation of a connection between women, embodiment, and spiritual distraction implies its opposite, namely the positive value of the non-embodied, transcendent, and masculine.

Scott Kugle’s research on the embodiment in Sufism emphasises that the body is a “cultural idea” “constructed through social images and in turn reinforces social values” (Kugle 2007, 3). Attitudes surrounding bodies, including gendered bodies, are therefore contextual and constructed through the interplay of social realities and religious ideas. For this reason, there is no neutral embodied action or conceptualisation of the body. Theology that associates women with embodiment and men with the capacity to transcend embodiment is therefore a result of a cultural idea and a social value. If the body is viewed as a problematic obstacle in the spiritual life, and symbolised through

metaphorical allusions to women and the feminine, there is a basis to argue that spiritual growth is a process of becoming masculine or performing masculinity. We know from references cited earlier in this paper, that Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh expressed his theology using this gendered imagery.

Farīd al-Zāhī, a Moroccan scholar of embodiment (*al-jasadāniyya*), identifies four modes in which the body functions in human spiritual experience: (a) “being against the body” (asceticism), (b) “being through the body” (body as spiritual instrument), (c) “being with the body” (such as in the experience of rapture), and (d) “being in the body” (such as in ordinary instances of sleep or rest) (Kugle 2007, 22–25). Among these four only “being against the body” is deemed positive within the *Ḥikam*’s theory of embodiment. The body and embodied phenomena are always presented as obstacles to be mastered and transcended, therefore precluding the possibility of “being through the body.” “Being against the body” mandates a kind of inner detachment from the material world, symbolised through detachment from women (in the *Ḥikam*’s explicit reference) and from created beings and embodied phenomena (in the *Ḥikam*’s implicit references). This “being against the body” is articulated both in this negative language of body-denial and renunciation of the world, and also in affirmative instructions to transcend embodiment.

The theory of embodiment that is confirmed in this aphorism values “being against the body” in al-Zāhī’s terms (Kugle 2007, 22–25). Bodily desire (*shawq al-jasm*) and desire for the embodied experience of marriage in this world is deemed secondary and inferior to the extra-bodily experience of the spirit (*rūḥ*) in spiritual wayfaring. Moreover, in prescribing that “Your Lord is your final destination” and encouraging the reader to journey toward God alone, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh effectively is describing God as the transcendent divine. In the sections to follow, it will become clear how spiritual instructions for body-denial and renunciation of the world prohibit any recognisable concept of divine immanence from appearing in the text and how this prefigures a performance of masculinity through the transcendence of embodiment. The next section offers a close analysis of the literary constructions and symbolism in Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s implicit gender discourses, framed through this analysis of the explicit reference to women in this aphorism.

6 Implicit Gender Discourse in the *Ḥikam*

Moving beyond the gender hierarchy and performative masculinity prescribed in the *Ḥikam*’s explicit reference, let us turn to the critical analysis of implicit references to gender and embodiment in the text. Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh shows how

body-denial, renunciation of the world, and detachment from created beings are connected to an emphasis on divine transcendence. This occurs first by defining creation, including the entire cosmos and individual created beings as ephemeral, illusory, and admonitory signs of the transcendent being that stands behind them. Second, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh uses the symbolism of prisons and bondage to explain the power of embodied creation over the individual and the imperative to transcend them. Third, the gendered language of dominance over materiality and embodiment is engaged signalling a kind of power and dominion that is attained by those who transcend embodiment. Fourth, this paradigm is mapped onto the individual human being and explained through metaphors of performing prayer.

7 Embodiment as Allusion and Admonition

Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh explains the nature of the cosmos when he states:

The cosmos is darkness and it is illumined by the manifestation of God in it. Whoever sees the cosmos but does not witness God in it, or by it, or before it, or after it, has overlooked the presence of God’s illuminating light and is veiled from the suns of knowledge by the mere appearance of allusory creations.

IBN ‘AṬĀ’ ALLĀH 1958, 106

Here, he emphasises that the cosmos is an illusory allusion and a veil concealing what stands behind it and gives it life. In another aphorism he refers to the created beings as objects to reflect upon, that must be transcended in order to reach God. He says, “God commanded you in this world to reflect upon creations; but in the Hereafter God will reveal to you the perfection of the divine essence” (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 1958, 125). Similarly he states: “God has permitted you to reflect on what is *in* created beings, but God has not allowed you to stop at these creaturely beings” (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 1958, 129). Thus, only gaze upon the transcendent core which underlies the outer forms of the cosmos and created beings.

In another instance, the created beings are not merely to be reflected upon, but are admonitions intended to provoke people to detach from them. Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh states, “outwardly, creatures are an allusion; but, inwardly, they are an admonition. Thus, the self (*nafs*) looks at the illusory exterior while the heart (*qalb*) looks at the admonitory interior” (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 1978, trans. Danner, 68).

Therefore, not only are created beings not real, they are like psychological warnings meant to turn the reader away from affirming them. In fact, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh explains that when individuals do not take heed of advice to detach from the world, God causes individuals to taste its nature to the degree that they need in order to detach from it (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 1978, trans. Danner, 104). This is confirmed again in aphorism 101, where Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh states, “When God alienates you from God’s creatures, then know that God wants to open for you the door of intimacy with God’s Self” (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 1958, 123). Note that he does not take the approach of advising to find God within the creatures, to seek intimacy with God through witnessing divinity in creation. The God described here transcends embodiment and even the immanent presence animating the material world: it is transcendent. Therefore, this body denying attitude is not only articulated through the negative connotations Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh attaches to creation, but through the positive affirmations he attaches to the more real, transcendent God, that lies beyond them.

8 Embodiment as a Prison

In other aphorisms, body-denial is expressed through more particularised metaphors that declare created beings are spiritual obstacles, prisons sources of stress, and chains of bondage (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 1978, trans. Danner, 61).

God made an inspiration come upon you so as to get you out of the grip of alterities and free you from the bondage of created things.

IBN ‘AṬĀ’ ALLĀH 1958, 115

He made inspiration come upon you so as to take you out of the prison of your [individual] existence into the unlimited space of self-contemplation.

IBN ‘AṬĀ’ ALLĀH 1978, trans. Danner, 60–61

Don’t be surprised by the occurrence of stress (*al-akḍār*), so long as you are caught in world. It [stress] actually shows you what is in accordance with the world’s character and essential nature.

IBN ‘AṬĀ’ ALLĀH 1958, 108

The real journey is when the world’s dimensions are rolled away from you so that you see the Hereafter closer to you than yourself.

IBN ‘AṬĀ’ ALLĀH 1978, trans. Danner, 69

Therefore, the world is stressful and created beings are distractions to which people become attached. When God desires to elevate the spiritual state of an individual, God inspires the individual to seek the transcendent. The door to intimacy with God's true self is alienation from created beings. God alienates the individual from embodiment so that they seek what is beyond creation and materiality. The highest level of spiritual journeying takes place beyond the realm of embodiment, in the realm of the divine transcendent. These aphorisms demonstrate that ultimately, the *dunyā* and all embodied, material, created beings, are but ephemeral distractions from the ultimate goal of spiritual development—the opportunity to witness the transcendent.

Reading these aphorisms together with the explicit reference to women, the gendered nature of Sufi development and self-conditioning in the *Hikam* becomes clear. The embodied elements of creation, likened to a woman and gendered feminine, are like the embodied elements of the individual self. They must be transcended, escaped, or subdued in order for progress to occur. The performance of masculinity is transcending embodiment by detaching from the *dunyā* and all the creating beings it contains. The performance of embodying a masculine gender identity is paradoxically linked to the transcendence of embodiment, which is gendered female in this matrix of intelligibility.

9 Embodiment as a Woman to Be Dominated

The language of domination and mastery arises in another set of aphorisms indicating that performing masculinity is not only transcending embodiment, but mastery over it. Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh claims in aphorism 247, "So long as you have not contemplated the Creator you belong to created beings. But, when you have contemplated Him, created beings belong to you" (Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 1978, trans. Danner, 108) and in aphorism 210, "You have not loved anything without being its slave, but God does not want you to be someone else's slave" (Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 1958, 140). Therefore, performing masculinity is deeply tied to dominion over the body. First individuals must have self-mastery over their own body, but then also through that domination and power, they receive mastery over other created beings. Here, Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh subtly invokes a parallel between the transcendent God to whom all created beings submit and the social power of a man who has achieved dominion over his possessions. Masculinity and power are conceptually connected to having control over embodiment and femininity, a relationship imagined through the language of submission.

These are gendered and hierarchical aspects of Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh's theology that emphasise, as Ayubi says, that men are portrayed as powerful,

authoritative, and rational, while women are instrumental, inferior, and irrational (Ayubi 2019, 9–10). Critics of these theologically rationalised gendered hierarchies, notably amina wadud, note their propensity to devolve into social hierarchies of domination and subjugation (see her work on the *tawhīdic* paradigm, wadud 2006, 257–267; wadud 2015, ed. Mir-Hosseini, 256–275). Or as Schimmel explains, just as the man is said to have dominion (*qiwāma*) over his wife, so too must the feminine element of the *nafs* be tamed by the masculine intellect (*‘aql*) (Schimmel 1997, 70). As Shaikh has asserts in her study of Ibn ‘Arabī, the way religions imagine the human being theologically is deeply gendered, and in these depictions, social values, politics, and spirituality are all present (Shaikh 2015, 92–93). Therefore, if transcending embodiment is an act of Sufi masculinity, acted out as the domination over embodied beings, this paradigm maps onto the human individual as an internal struggle to subdue the embodied aspects of the self.

10 Embodiment as an Impediment to Prayer

In the *Ḥikam*, the human body is a practical vehicle through which spiritual activities like prayer take place. Giuseppe Cesare has researched the physiological elements of Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s moral and spiritual thought, as expressed in two other texts, the *Miftāḥ al-Falāḥ* and the *Tāj al-‘Arūs* (Cecere 2014, 1–33). Cecere contends that allusions to the body in Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s thought reflect his engagement with the ideas of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 298/910) and he focused on the metaphors of blood, food, and nourishment (Cecere 2014). Although Cecere reads these metaphors as evidence of a physiological component in Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s thought, the passages he cites also confirm that “being against the body” is a normative physiological disposition even when Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh references the body and embodied practices. For example, distractions in *dhikr* are connected to the desires for food and sex, rooted in the belly (Cecere 2014, 15).

Cecere also observes the centrality of the heart (*qalb*), which is also the most significant body part invoked in the *Ḥikam*. Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh says, “insight belongs to light, discernment to the intellect, and both progression and retrogression belong to the heart” (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 1978, trans. Danner, 61). The human heart bears the meaning of “fluctuating” or “turning.” It is not described with fixed characteristics. The heart can be used in the proper way, as vehicle for spirituality, or it can be shackled to its embodied passions. When it is used for spirituality it is informed by reason, it reflects the image of God as though it were a mirror placed directly before the divine. However, when it is shackled by passions, worldliness, and embodiment, it reflects only created things.

Therefore, depending on the object of the heart's desire and the image that it reflects, the heart may achieve spiritual progression or regression. Just as Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh invoked gendered hierarchy in condoning journeying for the purpose of marriage with a woman in the explicit reference, this comes up again through the language of journeying toward created beings in other places. In order that the heart might be used for the purpose of spiritual development, it must disengage from the world. Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh proclaims:

How can the heart be illuminated when the image of created beings
circulates in its mirror?
Or how can it journey toward God while its chained by its passions?
How can it covet the possibility to enter God's presence,
And yet fail to purify itself from its forgetfulness?
How does it hope to understand instances of divine secrets,
When it has not repented for its wrongdoings?.

IBN 'AṬĀ' ALLĀH 1958, 106

For the heart to be a vehicle of spiritual growth, it must be emptied of the images of embodied phenomena. In order to do this, Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh states, "Nothing benefits the heart like isolation and entering a contemplative space" (Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 1958, 106) invoking distance from everyday life and other embodied creations. He says, "Contemplation is the course of the heart through the range of alterities" (Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 1958, 150), again emphasising that the material world is filled with alterities or tests, ultimately preparing one to move beyond them. Retreating from interaction with embodied phenomena and their distracting nature is a way to focus the heart upon that which is more real, namely the God which transcends them. This constitutes the performance of masculinity in a practical sense, through the act of physically moving one's body away from created beings into a place of seclusion (*khalwa*). It also represents a performance of masculinity in a conceptual way, since the physical retreat must be accompanied by a mental retreat which abolishes images and forms of worldly life that remain hidden inside the human mind and heart.

Returning to the language of gender performativity and the ideas of Judith Butler, the human body can be viewed as a stage, that is a theatrical context, in which the gender identities are performed. The most common 'act' which constitutes gender performativity within the text is prayer. Through prayer, the heart performs masculinity by becoming disengaged with embodiment and more thoroughly identified with the divine transcendent. Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh states, "Ritual prayer is a purification for hearts and an opening-up of the door of the invisible domains" (Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 1978, trans. Danner, 76). Therefore, ritual

prayer is the performative act through which human beings become disentangled from visible, embodied existence and submerged into a consciousness of the transcendent God.

Since some human beings only perform from the standpoint of their physical heart, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh adds that not everyone who performs will be successful in making this transition from the prison of embodiment to the freedom of divine transcendence. He states, “How astonishing is he who flees from what is inescapable and searches for what is evanescent! For surely it is not the eyes that are blind but blind are the hearts which are in the breasts (Q 22:46)” (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 1958, 112). Therefore, the heart is only an instrument of spirituality when it is detached from embodied phenomena, and fleeing toward the transcendent. The true heart is itself a non-embodied faculty. Moreover, he declares:

Since God knows of the occurrence of weariness on your part,
God has varied the acts of obedience for you;
And since God knows of the occurrence of impulsiveness in you,
God has limited them to specific times,
So that your concern be with the performance of ritual prayer,
Not with the existence of the ritual prayer.
Not everyone who prays performs well.

IBN ‘AṬĀ’ ALLĀH 1958, 125

In this passage, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh warns that even the physical performance of prayer is potentially a form of distraction. People should be concerned with the object of their prayer not “the existence of the prayer” by which he means, the embodied dimension of this performative act. Therefore, “not everyone who prays performs well” because some people who pray, do so with an embodied consciousness. Those whose prayer affirms transcendence pray well. Here, even embodied acts are mechanisms to transcend embodiment. They are varied specifically so as not to become distractions.

11 Conclusion

Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s reticence surrounding embodiment may have been connected to his strategy for navigating life as both an Egyptian Sufi teacher and Islamic legal scholar during the highly polemical emergence of philosophical Sufism in the 13th–14th centuries. Although we cannot know how he taught Sufism privately, a gendered analysis of the *Ḥikam* reveals its prescription of

a performance of masculinity through the transcendence of embodiment. The only explicit mention of women in the text is an aphorism that compares women to donkeys and created beings, expressing an interconnection between renunciation of the material world (*dunyā*) and detachment from the distractions of marriage. What this aphorism reveals is that the *Ḥikam*'s gender discourse is conveyed through its theory of embodiment. This aphorism prefigures a gendered binary in the text, which situates men and masculinity alongside rationality, spirituality, and transcendence and women and femininity with embodiment, irrationality, and worldliness. Using Derrida's concept of textual self-reference and Butler's theories of gender performativity and embodying identity, I show how this explicit reference functions as a key to the text's "matrix of intelligibility," the discursive, symbolic, and conceptual network through which gender is defined and delimited in the text. Here, the negative connotations attached to embodiment and the expressed link between embodiment and women in the *Ḥikam* translate into a programmatic series of 'acts' of body-denial and world renunciation, which function to constitute masculinity. Following the Sufi path prescribed in the *Ḥikam* requires particular 'acts' (body-denial, renunciation of the world and created beings) which constitute a process of embodying masculinity, based on the matrix of intelligibility in which gender identities are constructed within the text. Paradoxically, the reader is commanded to transcend embodiment through detachment, body-denial, renunciation of the *dunyā*, and instructed to affirm the superiority of divine transcendence and existence beyond bodies. Therefore, the student of this Sufi path performs masculinity by rejecting embodiment. The process of embodying a masculine gender identity *is* the negation, domination, renunciation of bodily and material life, which are associated with the feminine. The *Ḥikam* articulates a spiritual program designed to condition into performing Sufi masculinity by transcending embodiment. Although there is ample precedence for this kind of highly gendered imaginary in the Sufi teachings and writings that came before Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh, this essay has demonstrated how this is conceptually, symbolically, and rhetorically conveyed in the *Ḥikam*.

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