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Women in Rumi's Spiritual Circle

MAULANA JALAL AL-DIN MUHAMMAD RUMI (d. 1273), the most prominent mystic poet in Persian literature, is among the rare Sufi masters who have gone beyond the boundaries of Sufi traditions to open a broader space in their teachings for the feminine. In his spiritual teachings not only do feminine images and metaphors have great significance, but women are held in high regard in his spiritual circle as followers ('*morid*'), companions and spiritual guides.

In his didactic composition on speculative mysticism, the *Masnawi*, Rumi employs both feminine and masculine characters to play side by side in the scene of his interwoven stories in order to narrate the human being's struggle in the path of discovering his/her hidden darkness and unraveled luminosity. The 'self' is developed consequently through a journey toward recognition and balance; and the essential role of women is thus no different from that of men. In his didactic storytelling Rumi is the narrator of the paradoxical nature of the human being who is made up of an earthly body and a heavenly spirit, and the source of his/her being, regardless of sexuality, comes from both darkness and light.

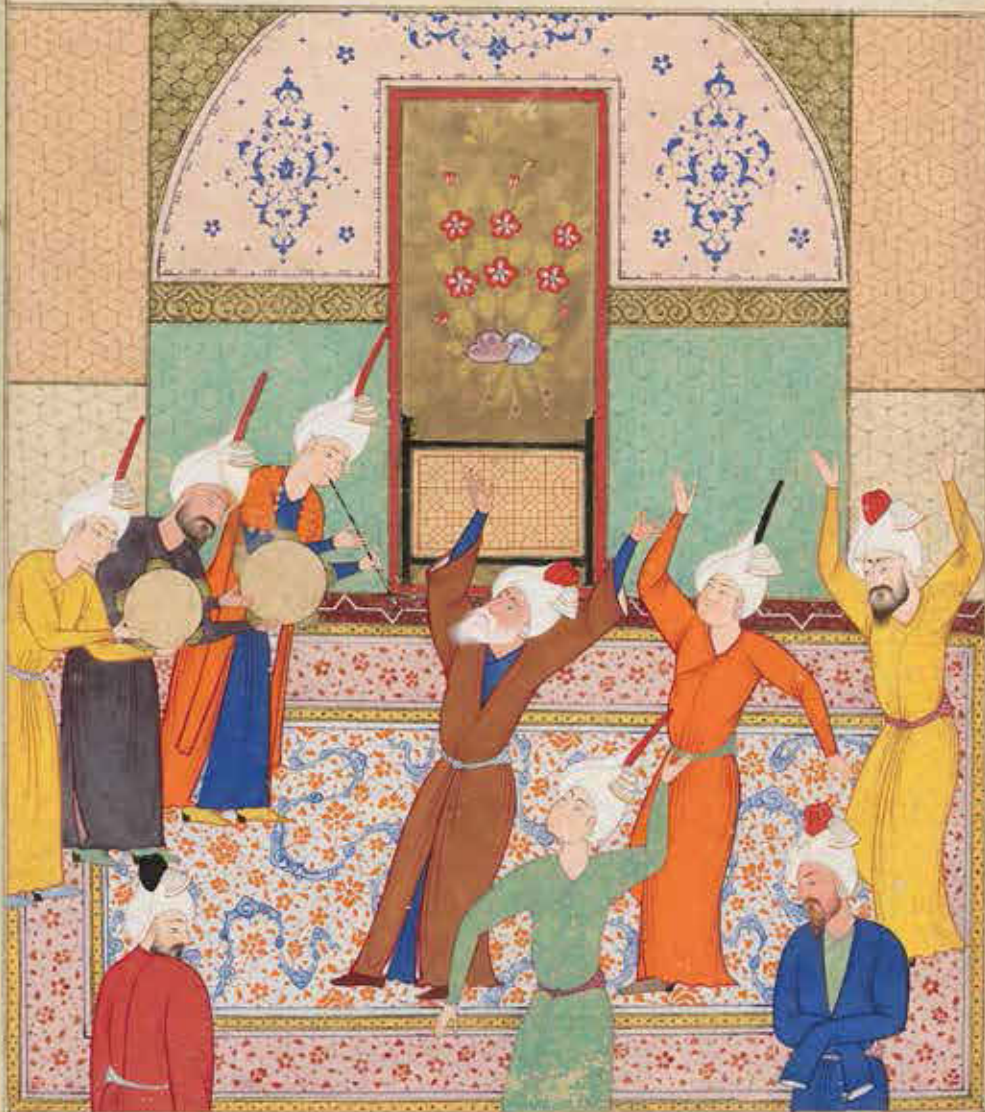
Rumi's view of the paradoxical nature of the human being has a strong roots in the Qur'anic commentary literature of the Sufi traditions, and can be traced to the mystical interpretation of the myth of creation, according to which Adam, who represents humankind, was created from the opposite elements: darkness and light. God formed the human being's body from clay (Qur'an, 55:14) and gave him life by breathing in him of His spirit (Qur'an, 15:29). Clay is considered to be an element carrying pure darkness, while God's spirit is the source of absolute light. The human being's nature, therefore, is a paradoxical combination of body and spirit, soft and hard, and a manifestation of darkness and light.

One of the major instances in which Persian Sufi exegesis discusses the uniqueness of the human being's position in creation due to this totality, instead of being made up of a single element, is *Kashf al-Asrar* written by Rashid al-Din Abolfazl Meybodi in the 12th century. Meybodi narrates the myth of creation in enchanting poetic language, using powerful imagery and metaphors to interpret the human being's totality, for which Adam was placed above all other beings, even the angels:

I created Adam in the most beautiful shape and form, and selected him among all other created beings. I entrusted him with my love, and made him worthy of being the 'selected' in my kingdom. I manifested the elements of sensation and the jewels

Opposite page: Maulana Muhammad Tabadkhani and other dervishes dancing.
From a manuscript of a work attributed to Gazurgahi, *Majalis al-'Ushshaq*, dated 959 (1552).
Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Ouseley Add. 24, fol. 119r.

چون رو او را که بن دکان او در آتش بسوزند حضرت رسالت صلی الله علیه و آله وسلم
رفت و نمودند در آن اثنا شخصی خبر آورد که آن در و مند که مذکور شده که شیفته و حیه الکلبی بود
فوت شد این حدیث را در آن محل فرمودند و بسیار آن در ویش رفتند و حالت او را اظهار فرمودند
و حیه الکلبی را امر کردند که آب بر او ریخت و دفن کردند و درین آخر خدمت مولانا محمد شارلمه
شیفته در ویش محمد نایبی بودند و در مجلس سماع سماعی بسیار میکردند و بدن بایع



of the sacred and the sources of tameness in his body, then I ordered the chosen angels and all other created beings to put their forehead on the earth and prostrate themselves in front of his throne [telling them] that he is the master and you are servants, he is the friend and you are the obedient.¹

Being created of clay, which is dark in its essence, and spirit, which is connected to the source of absolute light, the human being in the *Masnavi* is the narrator of this complexity and paradox. Observing the feminine characters in Rumi's colourful stories through the lens of this totality and paradox helps one understand how women have been glorified and praised as creators ('*Khaleq*') on one occasion,² and portrayed as human beings who fail to recognize the 'way' from the 'well' referring to pitfalls, on another.³

In the search for the value of the feminine in Rumi's doctrines, special attention should also be paid to his father's mystical teachings. It was undoubtedly the significance and values assigned to the feminine in Baha' Valad's mystical preaching which provided the basis for Rumi's viewpoint on women. In one of his sermons referring to the creation of the human being, Baha' Valad (d. 1324) came to the conclusion that the feminine was the cause of the means of realising divinity, ('*'oluhiiyyat*').⁴ He even broke the norms of Sufi sermons and went beyond the borders of the tradition of Sufi preaching to portray candidly the moments of his revelation through the narration of his intimate feelings toward, and his personal moments with, his wives.⁵ This approach to the feminine has no antecedent in Sufi teachings before his time and does not repeat after him. In his mystical masterpiece, the *Ma'aref*, feminine metaphors and imagery are at the core of whatever is creative and nourishing, and ultimately women's ability to give birth is considered the same as God's ability to create.⁶ This belief in the creative feminine had a profound impact on Rumi's doctrine and flourished in his teaching in the *Masnavi*, where in the story of 'The Bedouin and His Wife', he uses the term '*Khaleq*' (creator) for women:

The Prophet said that woman prevails exceedingly over the wise and Intelligent (While), on the other hand, ignorant men prevail over woman, for in them the fierceness of the animal is imprisoned.

They lack tenderness, kindness, and affection, because animality predominates over their (human) nature

She (woman) is a ray of God; she is not that (earthly) beloved: she is creative; you might say she is not created.⁷

To denote the concept of 'creator', Rumi uses the word *Khaleq*, one of God's sacred Names, for which use as a human attribute is forbidden. For this reason, the renowned translator of Rumi, Reynold Nicholson, has translated this word as 'creative', not 'creator'. As an erudite Islamic scholar and Gnostic, Rumi was fully aware of what he declared by using the word *Khaleq* for women, and in order to clarify the fact that the creator is God and women are just like Him, he uses the term '*gu'iya*' which means 'as if' in Persian. The following may be a more accurate translation for this verse:

She (woman) is a ray of God's light;

She is not just that (earthly) beloved, as if she is the creator, not the created.

Keshavarz confirms this reading with regards to our poet's collection of sermons in prose, *Fihe mafih*, where according to her, Rumi 'chooses womanhood, ability to nurture, and the privilege of childbearing as metaphors for the sacred in order to underscore the vital, personal, and evolving nature of the sacred'.⁸ By employing feminine images and metaphors, Rumi explains the divine's secret in the human being's heart as a foetus inside the body of a pregnant woman, who grows regardless of what the woman eats or where she sleeps, and regardless of her outward experience whether in time of war or peace.⁹

Women in Rumi's Family and His Spiritual Circle

In the scene of Rumi's personal and social life women also occupied a broad space as has been recounted in *Manaqeb al-Arefin* by his biographer, Ahmad Aflaki (d. 1374). Rumi had a close relationship with the female members of his extended household. Fatima Khatun, his daughter-in-law (Sultan Valad's wife), is one of the most distinguished women in Rumi's family. She was greatly loved and highly revered by Rumi who had personally taken charge of educating and instructing her.¹⁰ Being the daughter of Rumi's spiritual master, Salah al-Din Zarkub (d. 1270), Fatima Khatun was, in Rumi's belief, the holy mediator of her father's spiritual power and the source of bounty and blessing to all human beings.¹¹

Kera Khatun (d. 1303), Rumi's second wife, also has been portrayed in Aflaki's accounts as a woman with an outstanding personality who was highly esteemed and respected by Rumi and his *morids*.¹² Having been allotted a share of the income from Rumi's school organisation ('*madresa*'), Kera Khatun was financially independent and a source of financial support to the family as well.¹³ Even after Rumi's death, she and her daughter, Maleka Khatun (d. 1316), received their share from the income of the school organisation. According to Aflaki's account, on one occasion from 7,000 royal dirhams donated by Amir Taj al-Din to Rumi's school, 1,000 dirhams were sent to Kera Khatun and Maleka Khatun. It is worthy of mention that the share assigned to Kera Khatun and Maleka Khatun was equal to the share of Sultan Valad.¹⁴

Among other women in Rumi's household, Mottahara Khatun and Sharaf Khatun, Sultan Valad's daughters, who were given the epithet, '*Abeda* (pious, devout) and '*Arefa* (gnostic) by Rumi himself, were believed to be the possessor of sainthood ('*saheb-e velayat*') by his *morids*. These two ladies had disciples among the Seljuq royal women. Aflaki, himself, was one of Sharaf Khatun's disciples and learned the rules and manners of Sufi masters ('*Adab-e mashayekh*') under her supervision.¹⁵

The names of two concubines have also been mentioned in Sultan Valad's household: Sonbola and Nosrat. Sultan Valad married these two women after Fatima Khatun's death. Regardless of their position as slave girls before marrying Sultan Valad, these two women have been addressed with the respectful title of Lady, ('*khatun*'), wherever Aflaki mentions their names. They had rights equal to those of other women in the family, and their sons 'Abed Chalapi (d. 1338) and Vajed Chalapi (d. 1342) inherited

the spiritual leadership of the path after the death of Sultan Valad's first son Amir 'Aref Chalapi (d. 1332).¹⁶

There has not been any report of Rumi himself having any concubines ('*kaniz*') in his home, although there are mentions of the servants who helped his family with their housework.¹⁷ Nonetheless, he believed in slaves' equal human rights with other free people, and remained respectful of concubines. He had entitled Majd al-din Margi's Roman slave girl as *Seddiqa*, 'the truthful and pious'.¹⁸ Aflaki's account of Rumi's reprimand of his daughter, Maleka Khatun, over the rights of the slave girl who was treated improperly and beaten by her, indicates Rumi's extremely sensitivity to the widespread instances of unjust behavior towards slave girls.¹⁹

Rumi's female family members, Kera Khatun and Fatima Khatun particularly, were fully aware of the significance of his high spiritual and social status, trying to maintain the path of leadership for their descendants by emphasising their inherited sainthood. They apparently were not comfortable with the fact that Rumi had appointed Hisam al-Din Chalapi his successor, believing that the spiritual leadership of the order should remain in the family. According to Aflaki, after Rumi's death one of the close confidants of Fatima Khatun, blamed Sultan Valad for not struggling to take over the leadership of the path. Opposing Hisam al-Din Chalapi's succession, she reminded Sultan Valad that he was the one who deserved the position.²⁰ After Rumi's death, in a conversation with Hisam al-Din Chalapi, Kera Khatun also pointed to the spiritual connection between the father and son by narrating her dream of Rumi appearing as a phoenix and spreading the shadow of his wings on Sultan Valad. Although Sultan Valad sought a mystical interpretation for the dream, Kera Khatun succeeded in drawing Hisam al-Din Chalapi's attention to the missing link between him and Rumi.²¹ The outcome of the women's attempt to return the leadership to the family changed the course of the succession of leaders. The tradition of initiatic ancestry, which was chosen by Rumi, did not continue after Hisam al-Din Chalapi's death; the leadership of the path returned to Rumi's family through the succession of Sultan Valad and was eventually inherited by his offspring. A point so far overlooked is that women appear to have played a significant role in returning the spiritual leadership of Rumi's path back to his family.

Fatima Khatun also played the same role as a great supporter of the spiritual status of her son, Amir 'Aref. Amir 'Aref not only lacked Rumi's knowledge, vision, and intuition, but also seemed to have been ill-tempered, impatient and occasionally boastful about his spiritual power and social status; considering himself the 'Maulana's sword', and 'the source of the wondrous deed ('*keramat*')'.²² Therefore, not surprisingly, some of Rumi's *morids* did not consider him qualified for such high spiritual status.²³ The women of Rumi's household, including Fatima Khatun, Kera Khatun, and Sharaf Khatun, therefore, supported his position by emphasising the sanctity and holiness he inherited from Rumi through kinship and blood.²⁴

In addition to family members, the names of two female mystics have been recorded as Rumi's companions. Aflaki has narrated an account of Rumi's meeting

with a female mystic, Fakhr al-Nesa', who carried the title *valiya-ye kamel* ('the perfect saint'). She was believed to have reached such a high stage in spiritual experiences that Rumi shared with her moments of his revelation.²⁵ The name of another woman, Nizam Khatun, who was similarly regarded as a saint and apparently came from a modest background, is also recorded by Aflaki as Rumi's *morid* and Fakhr al-Nesa's companion. She once decided to arrange a *sama*' ceremony for Rumi and his companions and, being financially incapable of affording such a gathering, thought of selling her veil in order to provide the expenses. Upon learning about this, however, Rumi prevented her from selling the veil and arranged the *sama*' in her house.²⁶

Women in the *Maktubat*

There is a letter recorded in the collection of Rumi's letters, the *Maktubat*, written to a woman whose name is not mentioned, but is addressed as *khatun-i yagana* ('the unique lady'), whose precious presence, Rumi writes, has been the refuge for dervishes and guidance for the wayfarers of the right path. In the letter Rumi praises this woman for attaining a level of spiritual experience sufficient to observe the meanings concealed from other people. This, according to Rumi, is the stage of certitude and knowledge through which she has witnessed what is presumption for others.²⁷

In another letter written to the powerful Seljuq minister, Mo'in al-Din Parvana, Rumi expressed his support for a female mystic to return to the convent she had been living in, and which was, at the time of writing the letter, occupied by the minister's relatives. In this letter Rumi used the title of dervish for the woman and described her as 'a dear pious ascetic sister'. This woman apparently resided in a *khaneqah* in Konya.²⁸

Several royal women of the Seljuq court in Anatolia were also Rumi's *morids* and he occasionally visited them, preached to them, and wrote letters to them. Gorji Khatun, the favorite wife of Giyath al-Din Kay Khusrau II (d. 1246) was the most famous among Rumi's female *morids* and one of the most powerful queens in the Anatolian Seljuq court. She had a great influence in court affairs as well as on her husband's decisions. Zarrinkub, the renowned historian of Sufism, relates a fascinating anecdote about Gorji Khatun indicating that she once requested that a portrait of her face be engraved (sealed) on the coin alongside that of the sultan. Since engraving the image of a woman's face on the coin was contrary to tradition and considered a disgrace to the kingdom, the sultan convinced her that the image of the Sun, as the symbol of her beauty and power, be engraved along with his portrait.²⁹

There is another letter in the *Maktubat*, addressed to *Fakhr al-Khavatin*, 'the pride of woman-kind', which was, most probably, written to Gorji Khatun.³⁰ She had a close relationship with Kera Khatun and occasionally showed her gratitude and devotion to Rumi by sending gifts and offerings to his house.

A circle of royal women who were Rumi's *morids* was formed around Gorji Khatun, consisting of Gumaj Khatun, Shaykh-i Khavatin (Amin al-Din Mikail's wife), Mo'in al-Din Parvana's daughter and his wife (who was also called Gorji Khatun). These

women gathered on Friday night and invited Rumi for preaching and *sama*’.

Most important of all was Rumi’s profound understanding of women’s status and their social and religious limits and hardships. Perhaps a very significant letter documented in the *Maktubat* is written to ’Atabak ’Azam (presumably Fakhr al-Din Saheb ’Ata) about a young woman from a notable family, described as the daughter of Shams al-Din Yutash. This letter indicates clearly Rumi’s opposition to the social habit of defaming and disgracing women which, in his understanding, was not only harmful and even life-threatening to them, but also damaging to their family’s dignity. In this letter, Rumi pointed to the history of this harmful social habit, reminding ’Atabak ’Azam that people of weak judgment have throughout history not only accused women, but also the saints, prophets, and even God! He also defended the accused girl by writing a letter to her future husband, who had postponed or cancelled the wedding due to the spread of gossip. In this letter Rumi defended the girl and stood firmly behind the dignity of her family by mentioning that disgracing and defaming her was equivalent to disgracing him (Rumi) and his family.³¹ He considered dealing with the issue, which in his opinion amounted to a social sickness so important that he assigned his representative Hisam al-Din Chalapi to follow up the case relentlessly until the accusation was clear.

Another account of Rumi’s encounter with a prostitute indicates his awareness of women’s social hardships not being limited to the notable families, his *murids*, or the female members of his extended family. Aflaki relates that passing through a famous caravanserai in Konya, Rumi encountered a woman of bad reputation who lived there with her slave girls. She respectfully approached Rumi, who instead of ignoring or insulting her, a common behaviour among many religious scholars and Sufis towards such women, began a long conversation with her. In the end he expressed his admiration for her sincerity. He later explained that his respect for the prostitute lay in the fact that her appearance was in harmony and balance with her inner self. Contrary to many people’s hypocrisy and insincerity, she was who she was.³²

We should not ignore the possibility that these kinds of accounts might have been exaggerated to a certain extent by Rumi’s *murids* and devotees before being recorded by his biographer. Nevertheless, the significance of such narrations remains invaluable since it indicates that for Rumi’s followers, the respect of their spiritual leader for a prostitute was not a sign of imperfection, rather it was considered to be as sacred as the wondrous act of *keramat*.

Women and Rumi’s Sacred Dance, *Sama*’

Rumi is among those mystics in the history of Sufism who believed in the sacredness of music and poetry, therefore music and poetry were at the heart of his spiritual practice (see p. 47). His inclination toward the sacred dance, *sama*’ is generally considered to be the result of Shams-i Tabrizi’s teachings. Sultan Valad, however, relates a different account indicating that a woman played a significant role in encouraging Rumi to the practice of *sama*’ before Shams-i Tabrizi’s arrival in Konya. As one of the loyal *murids* of

Baha' Valad and highly respected by him,³³ this woman, namely the wife of Khaja Sharaf al-Din Samarqandi, after the death of her husband emigrated with his master's family from Khorasan to Anatolia. She married her daughter, Gowhar Khatun, to young Rumi in Larandeh, and later came to be known as the 'Great Kera' in Rumi's family. Aflaki directly quotes from Sultan Valad who considered her grandmother to be Rumi's first *sama'* teacher:

Before the appearance (arrival) of Shams, my grandmother Kera-ye Bozorg taught my father how to perform the sacred dance (*sama'*) in the movement of his hands, and thereafter Shams taught my father to dance in the movement of his feet.³⁴

This woman is believed to be the first to plant the joy of dancing in the garden of Rumi's mind.

Rumi's belief in the sanctity of music had a great impact on his behaviour towards, and respect for, musicians including women musicians. His view of women musicians went beyond the commonly held beliefs and prejudices of religious scholars, and even the religious law, since music was not considered unlawful in his teachings. He believed that the sound of music is equal to the evening prayer in the sense that both call people to the Truth; the prayer calls one's outer self to the service (presence) of God, and the music calls the inner self to love and knowledge.³⁵ He described the state of the men of God as a state of deadly thirst which has no cure other than being quenched with the water of music and dance.³⁶ Rumi's meeting with a female musician and singer named Tavus Khatun, who was residing with her concubines in Ziya' al-Din Vazir's caravanserai in Konya indicates that he was respectful of women musician's gift and skill. Accepting Tavus Khatun's invitation, Rumi entered her room and after saying his prayer there, blessed the woman with a piece of his turban.³⁷

There are also several accounts in *Manaqeb al-'Arefin* indicating that Rumi's female *murids*, particularly the above mentioned circle of royal women, had gatherings every Friday night and invited him for preaching and *sama'*. In these gatherings which usually took place in Shaykh-i Kavatin's residence, after Rumi's sermons on the meanings and mysteries of the path, women musicians played reed and tambourine for the *sama'* performed in his presence.³⁸ It should be mentioned here that it was common for noble families in Anatolia to have skillful slave girl musicians and singers in their houses.³⁹

While, as mentioned in Nizam Khatun's case, women were allowed to arrange the *sama'* ceremony for Rumi and his *murids* in their houses, their participation in the *sama'* ceremony, and sometimes even their presence, was not allowed by other Sufis contemporary to Rumi. Awhad al-Din Kermani, a renowned contemporary of Rumi, once performed a *sama'* ceremony in Konya and strongly objected to the presence of a group of women who had performed the sacred dance in a separate section of the *khaneqah*, and expressed disrespect toward them.⁴⁰

After Rumi's Death

From the viewpoint of the history of Persian literature, Rumi is the creator of two monumental literary masterpieces: the *Great Divan*, the collection of his mystical lyrics, and his didactic work, the magnificent *Masnavi*. Thus he himself is considered to be the initiator of his spiritual path and the one who completes his mystical school of thought. In Anatolia, however, after Rumi's death his path grew to be a major Sufi order, the Mevlevi, that 'enriched the cultural life of the Turkish people for almost five centuries'.⁴¹ During the first few centuries after Rumi's death, his successors continued to treasure his legacy of recognising women and respecting their rights to equality with the male *murids* in spiritual practices as well as in their position in the order.

Sultan Valad continued to have a close relationship with the circle of his father's female *murids* as well as the royal women of the Seljuq court. The most important case to mention regarding the situation of women in the order during his time is the position of a woman as his representative (*'khalifa'*) in the city of Towqat. Khosh Leqa ' Qunavi was placed in charge of a Sufi hospice in Towqat and had her own *murids* in that region. She had a close relationship with Sultan Valad's wife, Fatima Khatun, and on a trip to Amasya was Kera Khatun's companion. Khosh Leqa ' kept her position until the time of Amir 'Aref when a serious argument was reported between her and Nasser al-Din Wa 'ez, the well-known preacher, over his criticism of Amir 'Aref.⁴²

Amir 'Aref's relationship with his female followers was reputed to be more personal and emotional rather than spiritual. His most notable *murid* among the royal women of the Seljuq court was 'Ayn al-Hayat, the daughter of Gorji Khatun and Giyath al-Din Kay Khusrau II. She was the principal financial supporter of Rumi's mausoleum and school organisation.⁴³ Pasha Khatun, the wife of Sultan Oljayto Muhammad Kodabanda (d. 1316) who was living in Erzurum was also one of his *murids*. She once invited Amir 'Aref to visit Erzurum and for a long time did not allow him to return to Konya.⁴⁴ Soon after he returned to Konya, Pasha Khatun passed away and Amir 'Aref's immediate return to Erzurum, along with the tremendous grief and emotional mourning he showed at her funeral, has been taken as the sign of an 'unfulfilled love' between him and the queen of Erzurum.⁴⁵

The name of another woman known as 'the daughter of Oriya' is also among Amir 'Aref's female *murids*. Having left her family to live with her master, this young woman was madly in love with Amir 'Aref and ultimately was killed by her servants apparently after being cursed by her Shaykh.⁴⁶

During the two centuries after Rumi's death, his spiritual teachings spread widely in rural areas in Anatolia, and many practical ceremonies – some of which, such as *khedamat-i matbkh* ('the kitchen services') did not seem to be in harmony with the essence of Rumi's doctrine – were intermixed with his teachings.⁴⁷ In the times when his path broke the boundaries of city borders and spread throughout the suburbs and

remote villages of Anatolia, women enjoyed full equality with men in spiritual practices, as well as in holding the spiritual offices of masters, representatives, and convent keepers.

In the first few decades of the 11th century of the Islamic calendar a woman, named Dastina was appointed the representative of her father, Shah Muhammad Chalapi (d. 1591 CE), in the Qarahesar *khaneqah*. She used to wear Sufi costumes and was in charge of managing the affairs of her *khaneqah*. Her successor, Kuchek Muhammad Chalapi, also passed the position to his daughter Gunesh Khan. She also used to wear Sufi clothing including *sekka*, a multi-layered long hat with a long scarf, and the Sufi cloak, the *kherqa*. She started to take charge of directing all ceremonies assigned to the position of the spiritual guide, including *moqabela*, the lengthy ceremony of saying prayers, uttering remembrance, and reciting the *Masnavi* with a group of dervishes in the *sama* ' *khana* or prayer hall.⁴⁸

Due to the wealth and financial power of the order resulting from the vast endowments, as well as the social status of the order's leadership, during the following three centuries (11th to 13th), the leadership of the order was transferred back to cities from the rural areas. Furthermore, the order gradually transformed itself into a governmental endowment institution.⁴⁹ In this period the women's role in the Mevlevi order declined and their presence as guides, spiritual leaders and convent keepers of the path, gradually faded out. Women's participation in the ceremonies and spiritual practices, as well as their rights and freedoms, faced severe restrictions. From this period onward, gradually the names of women were almost eliminated from the history of the order.