

FROM SPIRITUAL STATIONS TO SOCIAL ETHICS: Reframing Sufi *Maqāmāt* as a Framework for Gender Justice

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Abstract: This article reexamines the Sufi doctrine of *maqāmāt* (spiritual stations) as an ethical framework for articulating gender justice within Islamic thought. While classical Sufi literature—most notably al-Qushayrī's *al-Risālah*—presents the *maqāmāt* primarily as a stage of spiritual discipline guiding the seeker toward proximity to God, their broader ethical implications for social relations remain underexplored. The central academic problem this study addresses is the persistent separation between Islamic spirituality and contemporary debates on gender justice, which are often framed solely in legal or socio-political terms. Through a qualitative, library-based analysis of classical Sufi texts, especially *al-Risālah* and related writings of al-Qushayrī, this article reconstructs the moral psychology of the *maqāmāt* as a virtue ethical framework grounded in ontological equality and moral accountability before God. The study argues that stations such as *tawbah*, *ḥubb*, *tawakkul*, and *riḍā* cultivate ethical dispositions that challenge patriarchal assumptions and reorient social relations toward justice and reciprocity. By demonstrating that gender equity is a logical implication of Sufi

spiritual anthropology, the article offers a new interpretive model linking Islamic spirituality to contemporary ethical discourse on gender justice.

Keywords: Sufi ethics; *maqāmāt*; gender justice in Islam; virtue ethic; Islamic spirituality.

Introduction

A frequently cited episode in early Islamic history recounts Umm Salamah's question to the Prophet Muhammad regarding whether women were equally acknowledged in the divine promise of reward. Her inquiry reflects a deeper existential concern about women's standing before God and their place within the moral and spiritual community of Islam.¹ The Prophet's response, affirming the Qur'anic recognition of both men and women in spiritual striving, gestures toward a fundamental principle of Qur'anic anthropology: spiritual accountability and proximity to God are not determined by gender.² Yet this egalitarian vision has historically coexisted with interpretive traditions that appear to situate women within hierarchical social arrangements.³ As a result, the question of whether gender shapes or potentially limits one's spiritual agency continues to animate contemporary debates within Muslim intellectual and ethical discourse.

At the heart of this discussion lies the Qur'anic assertion that humanity was created solely to worship God (Q.S. al-Dhāriyāt [51]: 56). Classical Muslim scholars have long interpreted this verse through various theological and spiritual lenses. Some exegetes frame worship primarily as obedience and submission to divine command,⁴ while others interpret it as a deeper process of experiential knowledge (*ma'rifaḥ*) through which the human being comes to know God inwardly.⁵ Within the Sufi tradition, this understanding is further

¹ Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Spirituality and Gender in Islam," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Islamic Spirituality*, 1st ed., ed. Vincent J. Cornell and Bruce B. Lawrence (New Jersey: Wiley, 2022), 217–233, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118533789.ch12>.

² Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Ja'fir al-Ṭabarī, *Jamī' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Ay al-Qur'an* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2010).

³ Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Knowledge, Women and Gender in the Hadīth: A Feminist Interpretation," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15, no. 1 (January 2004): 99–108, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410310001631849>.

⁴ Muḥammad Ṭāhir b. 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* (Tunis: Dār Tūnisīy li al-Nashr, 1984), 27.

⁵ Ismā'īl Ḥaqqī al-Burūsawī, *Tafsīr Rūḥ al-Bayān* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2009), 9:176.

developed into a comprehensive account of the human spiritual journey. Al-Ghāzalī describes the path toward God as a transformative inner journey (*safar*) that requires the purification of the heart,⁶ whereas Mullā Ṣadrā articulates it in terms of ontological ascents of the soul through successive stages of spiritual realization.⁷ These interpretations underscore the profound interiority of Islamic spirituality. However, by emphasizing inward transformation, classical discussions sometimes risk detaching spiritual development from the ethical and social structures in which believers actually live.

In the modern context, this separation has often become more pronounced. The processes of secularization tend to relegate spirituality to the private sphere, while questions of justice and equality are addressed primarily through legal or political frameworks. Yet the persistence of gender injustice, manifested in discrimination, exclusion, and stereotyping, demonstrates that structural reforms alone are insufficient without deeper moral transformation.⁸ Within some Muslim societies, gender hierarchies are occasionally reinforced through selective interpretations of religious texts and traditions. This situation raises an important question: can Islamic spirituality itself provide an ethical framework to address contemporary concerns about gender justice? Increasingly, scholars have suggested that Sufi thought offers such possibilities. Sa'diyya Shaikh, for instance, argues that Sufi metaphysics and ethics prioritize the inner reality of the human being over external identity markers, thereby providing conceptual resources for rethinking gender relations within an Islamic ethical framework.⁹

Despite this promising theoretical potential, a significant gap remains in the existing scholarship. Much of the literature on Islam, gender, and spirituality focuses either on the theological affirmation of gender equality or on the historical roles played by female Sufi

⁶ Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1982), 222.

⁷ S. K. Toussi, "The Central Importance of Spiritual Psychology in Ṣadrā's Philosophy," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 17, nos. 1–2 (2024): 27–45, <https://doi.org/10.1353/isl.2024.a949477>; Faiz Faiz, "Eksistensialisme Mulla Sadra," *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam* 3, no. 2 (2013): 436–61, <https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2013.3.2.436-461>.

⁸ Adis Duderija, Alina Isac Alak, and Kristin Hissong, *Islam and Gender: Major Issues and Debates* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 59–78.

figures.¹⁰ While these contributions are important, they often leave the structural categories of Sufi spiritual anthropology themselves unexplored. In particular, the doctrine of *maqāmāt*—the spiritual “stations” through which the seeker (*sālik*) advances along the path (*sulūk*) toward God—has rarely been examined as a normative ethical framework capable of addressing contemporary gender hierarchy. Classical Sufi manuals, such as al-Qushayrī’s *al-Risālah*, present the *maqāmāt* as stages of disciplined self-transformation that culminate in the realization of the *insān kāmil*, the fully integrated human being capable of embodying justice and spiritual maturity.¹¹ Yet these discussions are generally articulated in gender-neutral or implicitly male-centered language, leaving unaddressed how the spiritual path intersects with gendered social realities.

This article argues that the conceptual structure of the *maqāmāt* can be productively reread as an ethical framework for advancing gender justice within Islamic thought. Rather than approaching the spiritual stations solely as stages of individual ascetic discipline, this study interprets them as transformative ethical dispositions that shape both personal character and social relationships. In doing so, the article proposes a reconstructive reading of Sufi moral psychology that situates spiritual purification within broader commitments to justice and equality. The central contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that the genuine realization of the *maqāmāt* entails not only inward spiritual refinement but also an ethical orientation that challenges patriarchal assumptions and affirms gender equity as a necessary dimension of spiritual integrity.

Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative library-based approach grounded in philosophical and theological analysis. The study engages in a critical reading of classical Sufi texts—particularly foundational works that elaborate the doctrine of the *maqāmāt*—and places them in dialogue with contemporary scholarship on Islamic feminism and modern Sufi thought. By employing gender analysis and feminist hermeneutics as analytical tools, the article examines how the psychological and ethical transformations associated with each spiritual station can be reinterpreted to address gendered hierarchies within Muslim societies. Through this

¹⁰ Shaikh, “Spirituality and Gender in Islam,” 231.

¹¹ ‘Abd al-Karīm b. Ḥawāzin al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayrīyah*, ed. Ma‘rūf Zurayq and ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Balthahjī (Beirut: Dār al-Khayr, n.d.), 207.

interdisciplinary engagement, the study seeks to demonstrate that Sufi spirituality offers not merely an inward mystical path but also a normative ethical vision that can inform contemporary struggles for social justice.

Al-Qushayrī and the Foundational Idea of Gender Justice

Al-Qushayrī, renowned for both his scholarly authority and spiritual depth, is widely regarded as one of the most influential formative figures of classical Sufism. His full name is 'Abd al-Karīm b. Ḥawāzin b. 'Abd Mālik b. Ṭalḥah b. Muḥammad, though he is more commonly known by the honorific title of Shaykh, Zayn al-Islām, and al-Imām.¹² Born in Ustawa in 376/986, he experienced hardship early in life, losing his father and being raised under the guidance of the Sufi master Abū Qāsim al-Yamānī.¹³ These formative experiences shaped both his intellectual discipline and spiritual sensitivity, grounding his later contributions in lived awareness of human vulnerability and struggle.

Al-Qushayrī played a pivotal role in the fifth/eleventh century by seeking to anchor Sufism firmly within the normative sources of Islam, the Quran and the Sunnah. His well-known designation, *al-Jāmi' bayn al-sharī'ah wa al-ḥaqīqah*, reflects his effort to reconcile outward law (*sharī'ah*) and inward truth (*ḥaqīqah*). Responding to tendencies among some Sufis to privilege mystical experience at the expense of legal and theological rigor, al-Qushayrī, as an Ash'arite theologian, insisted on their inseparability. The *sharī'ah* provides the ethical and juridical framework of religious life, while the *ḥaqīqah* represents its inward realization. Together, they form the foundation of the *maqāmāt*—the spiritual stations through which the seeker advances toward proximity to God. Each station thus presupposes both outward conformity and inward transformation.¹⁴

With respect to gender, al-Qushayrī does not construct a hierarchical distinction between men and women in the domain of

¹² Ibid., 153.

¹³ 'Abd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin Qushayrī, *Al-Qushayrī's Epistle on Sufism: al-Risala al-Qushayriyya fi 'Ilm al-Tasawwuf*, trans. Alexander D. Knysh (England: Garnet Pub., 2007), xv–xvi.

¹⁴ Alexander D. Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 93–96, <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004194625.i-358>; Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 79–83.

spirituality. In *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt*, he emphasizes that all human beings originate from the same elemental sources—earth, sperm, and clot—thereby underscoring a shared ontological basis. Spiritual excellence, he maintains, depends upon the state of the heart and the quality of one's deeds rather than gender or social rank. His consistent use of the term *'abd* (servant) encompasses both men and women in the pursuit of spiritual realization. He writes that “the most noble of God's servants are those who are farthest from themselves and nearest to God Almighty”.¹⁵ The term *'abd* is likewise central in *al-Risālah*, where the exposition of the *maqāmāt* makes no gendered restriction, implying that these stages are equally accessible to male and female seekers.¹⁶

Al-Qushayrī's sensitivity to gender justice is further evident in his interpretation of Q.S. al-Nisā' [4]: 34. Distancing himself from readings that absolutize male dominance, he interprets men's “degree” in terms of physical strength and the greater responsibilities it entails. As he notes, “Men are given strength, so their burden is increased accordingly, but the lesion lies in the hearts and determination, not in the minds and bodies”.¹⁷ Superiority, therefore, is functional rather than ontological.

Similarly, in addressing the Quranic notion of *nafs wāḥidah* (a single self) in Q.S. al-Nisā' [4]: 1; Q.S. al-Zumar [39]: 6; Q.S. al-A'rāf [7]: 189; and Q.S. al-Rūm [30]: 21, al-Qushayrī refrains from elaborating on the popular report that Eve was created from Adam's rib.¹⁸ Although he references Adam in Q.S. al-Zukhruf [43], he does so not to assert male precedence but to highlight the shared human nature derived from a single source. He explicitly states that the term *nafs* conveys universality and inclusivity (*wa-lafẓ al-nafs li-l-'umūm wa-l-'umūm yūjib al-istiḡbrāq*).¹⁹ The emphasis, therefore, rests on ontological unity rather than gendered hierarchy.

Al-Qushayrī also rejects interpretations that assign blame to Eve for humanity's expulsion from Paradise. In commenting on Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]: 35-38, he situates the event within divine decree

¹⁵ 'Abd al-Karīm b. Ḥawāzin al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt* (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyah al-Āmmah li al-Kitāb, 2009), 444.

¹⁶ al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyah*, 153.

¹⁷ al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt*, 205.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:281; 5:114.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

(*taqdir*), arguing that Adam's encounter with the Tree unfolded in accordance with God's preordained will.²⁰ The prior declaration of humanity's vicegerency (Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]: 30) indicates that earthly existence was divinely intended from the outset.²¹ The descent to earth, therefore, is not primarily punitive but a purposive part of the unfolding spiritual journey by which humanity returns to God through repentance.²²

Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that al-Qushayrī does not regard gender as an impediment to spiritual realization. The path of the *maqāmāt* is open to all human beings, and spiritual rank is determined not by bodily form but by intention, discipline, and moral character. As he affirms, from the single self (*nafs waḥidah*) emerge diverse forms; likewise, from a single drop (*nutfah*) arise differentiated characteristics (*akhlāq*).²³

Accordingly, al-Qushayrī's foundational anthropology—grounded in ontological unity and ethical accountability—provides a compelling basis for recontextualizing the doctrine of the *maqāmāt* within contemporary discussions of gender equality. His synthesis of law and spirituality offers not only a model of mystical ascent but also an ethical framework capable of addressing enduring questions of justice.

Al-Qushayrī and the Ontology of *Maqāmāt*

From a Sufi perspective, nearness to God is attained through a structured spiritual journey articulated in terms of *maqāmāt* (stations). The singular *maqām* literally denotes a place or position; in Sufi terminology, it refers to the servant's spiritual standing before God, attained through disciplined effort and sustained purification of the heart and soul, ultimately culminating in *al-fanā' fī al-Ḥaqq* (annihilation in the truth).²⁴ Scholars such as Titus Burckhardt,

²⁰ Ibid., 80.

²¹ Ibid., 61.

²² Ibid., 83.

²³ Ibid., 372.

²⁴ Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975); Harun Nasution, *Filsafat & Mistisisme Dalam Islam*, V (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1995); Muh. In'amuzzahidin Masyhudi, *Wali-Sufi Gila* (Yogyakarta: Ar-Ruzz Press, 2003); Muhammad In'amuzzahidin, "Mukasyafah dalam Tasawuf: Studi Pemikiran Mukasyafah Ibn 'Atha' Allah al-Sakandari" (Dissertation, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, 2010).

Fethullah Gülen, Karen Armstrong, and Annemarie Schimmel describe *maqāmāt* as enduring inner states achieved through spiritual striving (*mukāsabah*) and sincerity on the part of the seeker (*sālik*).²⁵

Al-Qushayrī defines *maqāmāt* primarily in ethical terms, as cultivated virtues (*akhlāq*) realized through earnest effort. A seeker cannot advance to a subsequent station without first perfecting the preceding one.²⁶ In this sense, *maqāmāt* signify both stages of spiritual ascent and moral dispositions embodied in practice.²⁷ The spiritual path, therefore, entails not only progress toward closeness to God but also the gradual refinement of the seeker's ethical character.

The first station is *tawbah* (repentance), understood as the servant's return to God by relinquishing deviation and resolving to fulfill divine obligations. Repentance is also among the divine attributes of *al-Tawwāb*, the One who accepts repentance.²⁸ Al-

²⁵ Titus Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufism*, trans. D. M. Matheson (Great Britain: Mackays of Chatham, 1990); Fathullah Gülen, *Kunci-Kunci Rahasia Sufi*, trans. Tri Wibowo Budi Santoso (Jakarta: Raja Grafindo Persada, 2001); Amatullah Armstrong, *Sufi Terminology (al-Qamus al-Sufi) The Mystical Language of Islam*, 1st ed. (Kuala Lumpur: AS. Noordeen, 1995); Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

²⁶ al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayrīyah*, 56.

²⁷ Sufis have formulated spiritual stages (*maqāmāt*) in various ways according to their respective theoretical frameworks. For example, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī and al-Ghazālī identified nine *maqāmāt* that a *sālik* must pass through, namely *tawbah* (repentance), *ṣabr* (patience), *shukr* (gratitude), *wara'* (religious caution), *khanf* (fear of God), *ḥud* (asceticism), *tawakkal* (surrender to God), *riḍā* (contentment), and *maḥabbah* (divine love). Meanwhile, al-Suhrawardī offers a slightly different scheme by arranging the ten *maqāmāt* in sequence: *tawbah*, *wara'*, *ḥud*, *ṣabr*, *faqr*, *shukr*, *khanf*, *raja'*, *tawakkal*, and *riḍā*. In contrast to these two formulations, al-Qushayrī—as cited by Abdul Muhaya—proposes a more concise structure of *maqāmāt*, namely: *tawbah*, *wara'*, *ḥud*, *qanā'ah*, *tawakkal*, and the initial stage of *riḍā*. These conceptual variations demonstrate flexibility in the epistemological construction of Sufism and reflect differences in spiritual emphasis among its figures. Nevertheless, there is one significant point of convergence: the consensus that the *maqām al-tawbah* occupies a fundamental position as the initial stage in a Sufi's spiritual journey. Aḥmad 'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Sāyih and 'Ā'isyah Yūsuf al-Manā'ī, *Dirāsāt fī al-Taṣawwuf wa al-Akhlāq* (Beirut: Dār al-Thaqāfah, 1991); Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb fī Mu'āmalat al-Maḥbūb*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Maktabah Muṣaṭā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, n.d.); Abū Najīb 'Abd al-Qāhir b. 'Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad al-Suhrawardī, *Awārif al-Ma'ārif* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, n.d.); Abdul Muhaya, "Maqāmāt (Stations) and Ahwāl (States) According to al-Qushayrī and al-Hujwiri: A Comparative Study" (Thesis, McGill University, 1993).

²⁸ al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayrīyah*, 207, 213.

Qushayrī distinguishes between *tawbat al-inābah*, motivated by fear of punishment, and *tawbat al-istijābah*, motivated by shame before God's majesty.²⁹ More broadly, he outlines a threefold hierarchy: *tawbah* (repentance out of fear), *inābah* (repentance in hope of reward), and *awbah* (repentance characterized by a total return to God for His sake alone).³⁰

This station is grounded in three pillars: remorse for sin, immediate abandonment of wrongdoing, and firm resolve not to repeat it. The awakening of the heart from heedlessness is its essential precondition.³¹ Repentance, therefore, is not merely juridical but existential—an interior reorientation of the self.

The second station is *wara'* (scrupulous piety), commonly associated with abstaining from sin and doubtful matters. Citing Ibrāhīm b. Adham, al-Qushayrī defines *wara'* as abandoning what is doubtful, unbeneficial, or excessive.³² It marks the beginning of *zuhd* (detachment), just as *qanā'ah* (contentment) precedes *riḍā*.³³ Al-Qushayrī presents three degrees: avoidance of doubtful matters; renunciation of what degrades the soul and, at its highest level, abandonment of everything other than God.³⁴

Within the framework of Sufi ethics, *wara'* does not stop at legalistic caution but evolves into a reflective discipline that fosters moral sensitivity toward the ethical consequences of social actions. Thus, *wara'* demands vigilance not only against explicit normative violations but also against practices that subtly reproduce injustice, including unequal gender relations. In this context, *wara'* can be understood as a form of ethical self-regulation that encourages Muslim individuals to avoid exploiting others' rights based on social or gender privilege. A consistent practitioner of *wara'* not only shuns what is forbidden but also rejects the legitimization of domination cloaked in religious justification, thereby establishing it as the

²⁹ al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-Isbārāt*, 213.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 210–211.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 208.

³² *Ibid.*, 233.

³³ *Ibid.*, 234.

³⁴ Muhaya, "Maqāmāt (Stations) and *Aḥwāl* (States) According to al-Qushayrī and al-Hujwīrī: A Comparative Study," 234.

foundation for an ethics of equality rooted in spiritual consciousness itself.³⁵

The third station, *zūhd*, is often described as detachment from worldly preoccupation in favor of the Hereafter.³⁶ Al-Qushayrī emphasizes that relinquishing excessive attachment to the world opens the heart to wisdom.³⁷ Drawing of Ibn Khafif, he identifies lightness and joy in giving as signs of true detachment.³⁸ Following Ibn Ḥanbal, he outlines three levels: abstaining from the unlawful (for the general believer), renouncing excess even in the lawful (for the elect), and relinquishing anything that distracts from God (for the gnostic).³⁹ *Zūhd*, therefore, is not world denial but disciplined moderation, cultivating vigilance in both personal and social relations.

More deeply, the ethical dimension of *zūhd* is not only related to material consumption but also to the deconstruction of the desire for power, prestige, and domination (*ḥubb al-jāh*), which constitutes the psychological foundation of various social hierarchies, including patriarchy. Within this framework, *zūhd* functions as a practice of liberation from the logic of domination, as it demands the subjugation of the ego and the rejection of claims to self-superiority. A true *zāhid*, having freed themselves from attachment to status and symbolic authority, inherently rejects relational structures based on the subordination of others. Thus, *zūhd* is not merely ascetic in nature but also carries socio-critical implications as an ethic that undermines the legitimacy of hegemonic power and opens the possibility for more equitable relationships.⁴⁰

The fourth station, *qanā'ah* (contentment), signifies inner freedom. Al-Sullamī, citing ibrahīm b. Shībān, associates humility with glory, piety with honor, and contentment with freedom.⁴¹ Qur'anic exegetes frequently interpret *ḥayāh tayyibah* (Q.S. al-Naḥl [16]: 97) as *qanā'ah*. Prophetic traditions likewise extol it as an inexhaustible

³⁵ Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb fī Mu'āmalat al-Maḥbūb* (Cairo: Maktabah Muṣaṭṭā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, n.d.), 1:250–52.

³⁶ Muḥammad b. Mukarram b. 'Alī b. Aḥmad Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Cairo: Mu'assasah al-Miṣriyah al-'Āmmah, n.d.), 3:3:196–197.

³⁷ al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyah*, 242.

³⁸ al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt*, 240–241.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁴⁰ Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Luma' fī al-Taṣawwuf* (Brill: Leiden, 1914), 46–47.

⁴¹ al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt*, 279.

treasure.⁴² For al-Qushayrī, *qanā'ah* initiates *riḍā*, just as *wara'* initiates *zūbd*.

In a broader sense, *qanā'ah* represents a form of existential freedom from the logic of lack that underpins social competition and the production of value hierarchies. This inner contentment frees individuals from cultural pressures to meet standards of gender performativity or social status that are often oppressive. Thus, self-worth is no longer determined by possession, domination, or the fulfillment of normative gender roles, but rather by spiritual sufficiency in the presence of God. From this perspective, *qanā'ah* provides an ethical foundation for the formation of an egalitarian social space in which men and women are autonomous moral subjects rather than actors within an imposed hierarchical structure.⁴³

The fifth station, *tawakkul* (trust in God), occupies a central place in Sufi theology. It reflects pure reliance upon divine power and safeguards against subtle forms of associating partners with God.⁴⁴ Its locus is the heart; outward action does not contradict inward trust when one recognizes that all outcomes proceed from divine decree.⁴⁵ Citing Abū Turāb al-Nakhsyabī, al-Qushayrī describes *tawakkul* as harmonizing bodily worship, inward recognition of divine lordship, and tranquil sufficiency.⁴⁶ Abū Alī al-Daqqāq distinguishes three levels: ordinary trust grounded in faith; *taslim* (submissions) characterized by satisfaction in divine knowledge; and *tafwid* (complete delegation), embodying total surrender.⁴⁷

In the discourse on gender justice, *tawakkul* can be understood as an emancipatory framework that opens up space for women's liberation from the demands of absolute submission to male authority and patriarchal structures. When a servant affirms their ontological dependence purely on God, they simultaneously relativize forms of social, economic, and psychological dependence on fellow human beings. This theological orientation is not merely spiritual but also carries significant social implications: it deconstructs claims of human

⁴² al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayrīyah*, 294.

⁴³ al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Ri'āyah li Ḥuquq Allah* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadīthah, 1970), 402–4.

⁴⁴ Muhaya, "Maqāmāt (Stations) and Aḥwāl (States) According to al-Qushayrī and al-Hujwīrī: A Comparative Study," 59.

⁴⁵ al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayrīyah*, 299.

⁴⁶ al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt*, 300–301.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 300–302.

hegemony that are often sanctified within religious practices. In this context, *tawakkul* provides a normative foundation for women to assert their agency's autonomy without being positioned as a violation of religious obedience. Thus, the practice of *tafwīd* (delegating matters to Allah) conceptually negates the legitimacy of any form of human subordination, while affirming that absolute authority resides solely in the divine realm.⁴⁸

The final station is *riḍā* (contented acceptance), closely linked to faith in divine decree. It entails not denial of affliction but joyful acquiescence to God's will. Al-Qushayrī distinguishes between its attainable dimensions within the *maqāmāt* and its higher manifestation as a divinely bestowed state (*ḥā*).⁴⁹ Acceptance must align with the principles of the *sharī'ah*; it is not passive resignation to injustice.⁵⁰ The narrative of Moses illustrates that divine pleasure lies in the servant's contentment with God's decree.⁵¹ However, al-Wāsiṭī cautions that even *riḍā* must not devolve into a form of self-satisfaction that obscures deeper spiritual truth.⁵²

Conceptually, *riḍā* marks the pinnacle of integration between theological awareness and ethical responsibility. Acceptance of divine decree cannot be reduced to a legitimization of unjust social realities; rather, it demands a critical capacity to distinguish between God's normative will—grounded in justice—and historical conditions that may deviate from that principle. Within this framework, *riḍā* functions precisely as an ethical mechanism that prevents the instrumentalization of the theology of destiny to justify inequality, including in gender relations. By asserting that obedience is valid only insofar as it aligns with divine principles, this concept simultaneously deconstructs ideological claims that invoke God's name to maintain domination. Furthermore, *riḍā* shapes an ethical subject capable of accepting existential limitations without losing commitment to justice,

⁴⁸ al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'Ulum al-Din*, 4: 258-260; Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 143-45.

⁴⁹ al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if Al-Isharat*, 342-342.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 342.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 343.

⁵² *Ibid.*

thereby bridging spiritual depth with moral courage in responding to oppressive social structures.⁵³

Collectively, these stations represent a continuous discipline of self-purification. In the framework of ethical Sufism (*taṣawwuf akhlāqī*), this process is articulated through three interrelated, namely *takhallī* (emptying the heart of vice), *taḥallī* (adorning it with virtue), and *tajallī* (experiencing divine manifestation).⁵⁴ The early stations emphasize purification; the later stations cultivate adornment; and *tajallī* reflects divinely granted unveiling following sustained spiritual struggle (*mujāhadah*).

From a psychological perspective, *maqāmāt* correspond to heightened spiritual consciousness. William James distinguishes material, social, and spiritual forms of self-awareness.⁵⁵ Spiritual consciousness, which orients moral choice and self-reflection, occupies the highest level.⁵⁶ As Shanyang Zhao interprets them, these dimensions form an integrated hierarchy within the empirical self.⁵⁷ Within this framework, *maqāmāt* may be understood as structured processes that cultivate spiritual self-awareness, thereby shaping personality and conduct.

Accordingly, the Sufi ascent through successive stations is not merely mystical abstraction but the forging of character. The dialectic between *maqāmāt* and gender justice becomes evident at this point: as spiritual consciousness deepens, ethical comportment in social relations—including gender relations—must likewise mature. Justice, mutual respect, and balance emerge as a natural expression of a heart disciplined by repentance, detachment, trust, and contentment.

⁵³ Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), 266–69.

⁵⁴ Muhammad Nur and Muhammad Iqbal Irham, "Tasawuf dan Modernisasi: Urgensi Tasawuf Akhlaki pada Masyarakat Modern," *Substantia: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 25, no. 1 (April 2023): 107, <https://doi.org/10.22373/substantia.v25i1.16851>.

⁵⁵ David E. Leary, "William James on the Self and Personality: Clearing the Ground for Subsequent Theorists, Researchers, and Practitioners," in *Reflections on the Principles of Psychology: William James After A Century*, ed. Michael G. Johnson and Tracy B. Henley (New York: Psychology Press, 1990), 108.

⁵⁶ Leary, "William James on the Self and Personality: Clearing the Ground for Subsequent Theorists, Researchers, and Practitioners," 109–111.

⁵⁷ Shanyang Zhao, "Self as an Emic Object: A Re-Reading of William James on Self," *Theory & Psychology* 24, no. 2 (April 2014): 199–216, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354314527181>.

Ontologically, then, *maqāmāt* transcend theological gradation; they constitute a transformative reordering of being. Through their disciplined cultivation, the servant moves beyond the domination of the lower self (*nafī*) toward a state of ethical and spiritual integration. This transformation entails both vertical proximity to God and horizontal responsibility toward others. In this sense, *maqāmāt* provide a profound ethical foundation for equitable gender relations, grounded not merely in social theory but in the spiritual realization of divine unity (*tawḥīd*) and moral refinement.

Rereading *Maqāmāt* through the Lens of Gender Justice: A Critical-Theoretical Reconstruction

A critical rereading of the *maqāmāt* through the lens of gender justice requires placing Sufi moral psychology in sustained, methodologically self-aware conversation with contemporary ethical theory, while remaining faithful to the internal coherence of its conceptual world. In the Sufi tradition, spirituality is the decisive measure of human worth. The foundational concept of ‘*abd* (servant) serves as the epistemological starting point for articulating the spiritual stations. In *al-Risālah*, al-Qushayrī defines a *maqām* as that which the servant attains through disciplined conduct, action, and sustained striving.⁵⁸ Spiritual rank, therefore, is determined by ethical exertion (*kasb*), not by inherited status, social location, or ontological privilege. On these terms, gender is neither a prerequisite for nor an impediment to spiritual realization. As noted by Su‘ād al-Ḥakīm. Sufi terminology often detaches qualities such as “spiritual virility” (*rujūliyyah*) from biological maleness, viewing them instead as ethical stations accessible to all perfected souls, regardless of sex.⁵⁹ This argument is consistent with Sachiko Murata’s analysis, which shows that the categories of masculine and feminine in Islamic cosmology are symbolic-spiritual qualities, not fixed biological attributes.⁶⁰

This premise is reaffirmed in al-Qushayrī’s *Laṭā’if al-Ishārāt*, where spiritual excellence is grounded in purity of heart and integrity of action rather than biological difference.⁶¹ The theological anthropology that emerges is fundamentally egalitarian: hierarchy,

⁵⁸ al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayrīyah*, 153.

⁵⁹ al-Ḥakīm Su‘ād, *al-Mu‘jam al-Ṣūfī* (Beirut: Dandarah, 1981), 506.

⁶⁰ Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 174–77.

⁶¹ al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā’if al-Ishārāt*, 444.

where it appears, is moral rather than gendered. This principle of ontological equality has been thoroughly documented by Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī in his work *Dhikr al-Niswa al-Muta'abbidāt al-Ṣūfiyyāt*, which demonstrates that the spiritual status (*'ubūdīyah*) of Sufi women is understood to be equal to that of men within the framework of classical Islamic ontology.⁶² As Murata points out, the principle of *tawḥīd* presupposes an ontological unity that negates gender-based essential hierarchies.⁶³ Such an account resonates strongly with contemporary Islamic feminist hermeneutics. Amina Wadud argues that Qur'an consistently addresses men and women as parallel moral agents whose worth is determined by *taqwā*, not by sex, thereby challenging readings that absolutize male authority.⁶⁴ Similarly, Kecia Ali demonstrates that classical legal constructions of gender hierarchy are historically contingent rather than theologically inevitable, and that reciprocity offers a more coherent ethical norm within Islamic moral reasoning.⁶⁵ Read alongside al-Qushayrī, these analyses underscore that Sufi moral thought contains internal normative resources for articulating gender justice without relying on external ideological frameworks.

Al-Qushayrī's well-known assertion that neglect of the truth leads to ruin, while neglect of creation forecloses spiritual elevation,⁶⁶ further resist any attempt to confine spirituality to a private, inward domain. His formulation presupposes an integrated moral vision in which devotion to God and responsibility toward others are mutually implicative. Spiritual ascent that bypasses justice in human relations is, within this framework, conceptually incoherent. This perspective aligns with recent trends in the study of Islamic ethics that reject the separation between the spiritual dimension and social responsibility. Contemporary literature indicates that Islamic ethics has evolved as a

⁶² Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, *Dhikr al-Niswa al-Muta'abbidāt al-Ṣūfiyyāt*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad al-Tanāhī (Cairo: Maktabah al-Khānī, 1993), 24–26.

⁶³ Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 8–10.

⁶⁴ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Women: Rereading The Sacred Text from A Women's Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33–35; Rahmah Eka Saputri et al., "The Role of Women in Marital Dynamics: Hadis Interpretation of Amina Wadud's Hermeneutic," *MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 48, no. 2 (December 2024): 282–300, <https://doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v48i2.1180>.

⁶⁵ Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006).

⁶⁶ al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt*, 194.

normative system that is contextual, historical, and responsive to social change; thus, it cannot be reduced to individual piety alone, but also encompasses a commitment to social justice and collective well-being.⁶⁷ Such a work supports reading the *maqāmāt* not as a purely ascetical schema but as a moral vision with concrete public implications, including for gender relations.

Within the integrated horizon, the stations unfold as a sustained process of ethical formation. Al-Qushayrī's definition of *tawbah* as a return to God through renouncing deviation and fulfilling divine claims,⁶⁸ together with the practice of *muḥāsabat al-naḥs*,⁶⁹ establishes a disciplined mode of moral self-examination. Atif Khalil's study of the concept of *tawbah* in early Sufism confirms that, for al-Qushayrī, repentance is not an isolated private ritual, but rather an existential reorientation that demands ongoing ethical transformation in human relations with God and one's fellow human beings.⁷⁰ Repentance extends beyond ritual lapses to encompass patterns of harm embedded in everyday social practice. In contemporary theoretical terms, the dynamic parallel critical self-reflection in feminist thought involves bringing inherited assumptions and normalized hierarchy under scrutiny. Saba Mahmood has shown that ethical transformation often occurs through disciplined self-formation within a normative tradition rather than through its wholesale rejection.⁷¹ By analogy, *tawbah* may be understood as a Sufi practice of moral accountability that enables believers to confront internalized patriarchal dispositions without abandoning the theological grammar of Islam itself.

The subsequent emphasis on vigilance—expressed through abstention from doubtful matters (*wara'*)⁷² and detachment from worldly prestige (*ẓuhd*)⁷³—further unsettles the symbolic structures that sustains gender hierarchy. Patriarchal authority often rests on

⁶⁷ Paul L. Heck, "Mysticism as Morality: The Case of Sufism," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 34, no. 2 (2006): 253–86; Jasser Auda, "A *Maqāsidī* Approach to Contemporary Application of the Shari'ah," *Intellectual Discourse* 19, no. 2 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.31436/id.v19i2.231>.

⁶⁸ al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayrīyah*, 207–13.

⁶⁹ al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt*, 209.

⁷⁰ Atif Khalil, *Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism* (New York: SUNY Press, 2018), 145–147.

⁷¹ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 136–39.

⁷² al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt*, 233.

⁷³ Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 3:233.

sacralized claims to honor, control, and public recognition; however, *zuhd* deliberately relativizes such markers by subordinating them to nearness to God. When honor is measured exclusively by *taqwā* (God consciousness), worldly dominance loses its moral legitimacy.⁷⁴ In this respect, Sufi asceticism functions as an implicit critique of hegemonic masculinity by depriving domination of its spiritual credibility. Contemporary analyses of Islamic masculinities similarly argue that moral excellence cannot be equated with authority over women; rather, it must be grounded in ethical restraint and justice.⁷⁵

Al-Qushayrī's understanding of *qanā'ah* as inner sufficiency and freedom.⁷⁶ Likewise, it invites a reconsideration of gender difference. Differences between men and women need not be translated into evaluative hierarchies. Contentment with divine apportionment can release individuals from the anxiety that fuels competition for dominance and status. At the same time, such contentment cannot be conflated with passive acceptance of injustice. As Kecia Ali notes, the Islamic moral traditions themselves contain principles that permit-and indeed require-critique when social arrangements contradict overarching commitments to justice.⁷⁷ Properly understood, *qanā'ah* frees a person from culturally imposed measures of worth while preserving their ethical responsibility to challenge inequality.

Finally, the culmination of the path in *tawakkal* (a purified reliance upon God)⁷⁸ and *ridā* (serene acceptance of divine decree)⁷⁹ relativizes all forms of human authority. Al-Qushayrī's clarification that obedience is only owed to what accords with divine law⁸⁰ decisively blocks the sacralization of oppressive systems. Appeals to fate or divine will cannot legitimize injustice. Trust in God displaces ultimate reliance on patriarchal structures, and contentment with divine decree coexists with principled resistance to what contradicts divine justice. This theological distinction is critical: it separates

⁷⁴ Muhaya, "Maqāmāt (Stations) and *Aḥwāl* (States) According to al-Qushayrī and al-Hujwīrī: A Comparative Study," 53.

⁷⁵ Amanullah De Sonny, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 82–85.

⁷⁶ al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayrīyah*, 279.

⁷⁷ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 157–160.

⁷⁸ Muhaya, "Maqāmāt (Stations) and *Aḥwāl* (States) According to al-Qushayrī and al-Hujwīrī: A Comparative Study," 59.

⁷⁹ al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayrīyah*, 342.

⁸⁰ al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt*, 343.

genuine submission to God from acquiescence to inequity falsely attributed to Him.

It is important to underscore that this rereading does not project modern egalitarian ideals anachronistically onto a premodern text. Rather, it reconstructs the ontological horizon already implicit in al-Qushayrī's account. Once *'ubūdīyah* is recognized as the fundamental existential condition of all human beings, any hierarchy not grounded in moral-spiritual quality becomes theologically unstable. Gender justice, in this sense, is not introduced as an external agenda but emerges as a logical implication of a relational ontology in which every human being stands equally before God as a locus of divine manifestation and as a subject of accountability.

This reconstruction also challenges the interpretation of Sufism that reduces it to inward mysticism detached from social life. The ontology of the *maqāmāt* suggests that intensifying proximity to God simultaneously intensifies ethical responsibility toward others. Spiritual ascent is not an escapist movement into private transcendence but a process of forming a morally responsive subject capable of inhabiting social relations justly. If patriarchal systems rely on naturalized claims of superiority and the religious legitimization of hierarchy, the ontological parity embedded in the concept of *'abd* destabilizes those claims at their metaphysical root. What is contested, therefore, is not merely unjust practice but the sacralized logic that sustains domination.

Taken together, this analysis presents the *maqāmāt* as a coherent virtue-ethical vision in which ontological equality, disciplined self-critique, detachment from domination, and reliance upon divine justice converge. The stations articulate the concept of human beings as equally accountable moral agents before God and bind spiritual refinement to social responsibility. Within this framework, gender justice is neither an external addition to Sufi thought nor a modern overlay imposed upon it. It emerges instead as a consistent implication of Sufi moral theology itself. To advance toward God necessarily entail's purifying one's relationships with God's creation, affirming both men and women as morally responsible subjects whose dignity rests not on hierarchy but on *taqwā*.

Concluding Remarks

This article has argued that the Sufi doctrine of *maqāmāt*, often understood primarily as a framework for personal ascetic discipline and inward spiritual ascent, holds broader ethical implications that remain insufficiently explored in contemporary discussion of gender justice. A closer reading of classical Sufi texts, particularly works such as al-Qushayrī's *al-Risālah*, suggests that the spiritual stations are not merely private stages of piety but formative processes that shape moral character and human relationships. When viewed through this ethical lens, the spiritual path outlined in the *maqāmāt* cannot be separated from the social realities in which believers live. The cultivation of humility, self-awareness, and moral discipline—central to Sufi moral psychology—ultimately challenges hierarchical forms of domination, including patriarchal structures that undermine the Quranic affirmation of human dignity.

Repositioning the *maqāmāt* within contemporary conversation in Islamic ethics and gender thus offers an important theoretical contribution to both Sufi studies and broader debates on justice in Muslim societies. Rather than treating spirituality and social reform as separate domains, this perspective highlights how Islamic spiritual traditions themselves contain conceptual resources for addressing structural inequalities. By rereading the spiritual stations as ethical orientations that inform social relations, this study suggests that the pursuit of closeness to God is inseparable from the moral responsibility to cultivate a more just and equitable community. In this sense, the transformative vision of Sufi spiritual anthropology resonates closely with the egalitarian ethics embedded in the Qur'anic message.

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