Introduction

The Intersection of Gender and Age within Muslim Discourse

This book invites readers into the little-known world of female religious authority and gender history in early modern Islamic Central Asia. It tells the story of the sixteenth-century female Sufi master celebrated as Aghā-yi Buzurg (the Great Lady) and her community. This book germinated in my fascination with the life of Aghā-yi Buzurg, who continues to be honored and remembered today in oral traditions associated with her shrine complex in Bukhara, Uzbekistan. Those who visit the shrine are often reminded of the saint’s triumph over her contemporary rival, Mīr-i ʿArab, a prominent public figure whose grandiose madrasa remains active in Bukhara and constitutes a top tourist destination in the region.¹

Aghā-yi Buzurg was active in the sixteenth century, a period of major sociopolitical, religious, and economic changes in the Persianate world

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after the downfall of the Timurid dynasty in the early 1500s. In this milieu, Shi‘ism was on the rise thanks to the support of the Safavid dynasty, which had recently taken power in Iran. At the time, Central Asia was under the rule of the newly established Sunni dynasty of the Shibanids. Aghā-yi Buzurg’s community was based in Mawarannahr (Transoxiana), a focal point of the major religio-political transformations that would come to define early modern Central Asia. The misfortunes faced by Aghā-yi Buzurg and her disciples during this transitional period were related to her group’s upholding of the Timurid-era tradition of devotion to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the Prophet Muḥammad’s cousin and son-in-law and the first Shi‘i imam, even though under Shibanid rule veneration of ‘Alī became associated with sympathies for the Shi‘i Safavids. It is remarkable that this reverence for ‘Alī and his descendants, not her public career as a leader of a Sufi community consisting of male and female disciples, was the main factor provoking attacks against her community.

In this book, I closely examine a devotional work titled Mząhar al-ʿajāʾīb, which was written to expound on the teachings of Aghā-yi Buzurg by her male disciple Ḥâfiz Baṣr. Although it is an invaluable primary source that sheds light on female religious authority in sixteenth-century Central Asia, the Mząhar al-ʿajāʾīb is hardly known, even among specialists. By locating

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2 For a general overview of sixteenth-century Central Asia, see Robert McChesney, “Central Asia VI: In the 16th–18th Centuries,” Elr (2000).
the text in its historical context, I hope to bring to the foreground several key features of Aghā-yi Buzurg’s teachings and religious profile.

According to Ḥāfīz Baṣīr, he began drafting the Mazḥar al-ʿajāʾīb after receiving a revelation from the angels in 1565, forty-two years after Aghā-yi Buzurg’s death in 1523. Ḥāfīz Baṣīr was instructed to compose a work to defend the spiritual path of Aghā-yi Buzurg’s community and show that this path was not different from other “paths and spiritual states” in terms of “its principles and fundamentals.”

I contend that the Mazḥar al-ʿajāʾīb lays claim to ʿAlī on behalf of the Sunnis in competition with the Shiʿism promoted by the Safavid dynasty. Importantly, the very claim to ʿAlī strained the relationship between Aghā-yi Buzurg’s community and the Bukharan religious and political authorities (including Mīr-i ʿArab), culminating in accusations of Shiʿi heresy against her followers.

Ḥāfīz Baṣīr was an eccentric Sufi. A series of historical and hagiographical sources produced between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries reveals two facets in the portrayal of Ḥāfīz Baṣīr in Sufi literature, which associates him with either the Naqshbandī or the Yasavi community. The Mazḥar al-ʿajāʾīb highlights Aghā-yi Buzurg and Ḥāfīz Baṣīr’s unusual fourfold spiritual initiation connecting them to the Prophet Muḥammad, which probably promoted the development of narrative traditions in later hagiographies that represent Ḥāfīz Baṣīr as an ʿuwaysī Sufi – that is, a Sufi without a connection to a living master. Ḥāfīz Baṣīr’s Sufi legacy continued into the middle of the eighteenth century in the region of Khwarazm through the Naqshbandī silsila (spiritual chain of transmission) that Ḥāfīz Baṣīr passed on to his direct disciple, Amīr ʿAlī. Thus, the preservation of Ḥāfīz Baṣīr’s memory by Amīr ʿAlī and his line of successors played a key role in cementing Ḥāfīz Baṣīr’s position within the Naqshbandī Sufi tradition.

The Mazḥar al-ʿajāʾīb is a complex work that stands out from other devotional and Sufi hagiographical texts produced in Central Asia because of its cryptic language and unusual internal organization. Its compositional

“A Female Saint in Muslim Polemics: Aghā-yi Buzurg and Her Legacy in Early Modern Central Asia” (PhD diss., Indiana University Bloomington, 2019).

5 MA, fol. 7a.

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style is not easily classified into any specific literary genre, as it incorporates elements of hagiographical, doctrinal, and didactic literature. The themes of suffering and lamentation and accusations of Shi'i heresy are important for understanding this text. Ḥafiz Baṣrī’s decision to model his work on pseudo-'Aṭṭār’s Mazḥar al-ʿajāʾīb,7 which is devoted to glorification of ʿAlī, affirms the centrality of the veneration of ʿAlī and his descendants in his Mazḥar al-ʿajāʾīb. Moreover, poetic verses included in the text showcase Ḥafiz Baṣrī’s attachment to the Khurasani intellectual tradition that played an important role in the development of his pro-ʿAlid worldview. In addition, the fables of the Stone Doll, Zirak-i Afkār, and the Patience Stone, which account for one-third of the Mazḥar al-ʿajāʾīb, reveal the inner dimension of the text. The emphasis on the role of treacherous associates and the theme of suffering in these fables alludes to the accusations of Shiʿi heresy and other hardships endured by Ḥafiz Baṣrī during his career.8

In the Mazḥar al-ʿajāʾīb, Aghā-yi Buzurg is portrayed as a Sufi master of advanced age with a community of both male and female devotees, including the senior members of the ruling Shibanid dynasty based in Bukhara. However, Ḥafiz Baṣrī shows little interest in legitimizing his master’s public role. This feature distinguishes the Mazḥar al-ʿajāʾīb from other hagiographies devoted to female saints within Western contexts. Beyond describing her as “an imāma [female imam] of the time, like Fāṭima [the Prophet’s daughter] and ʿĀʾisha [the Prophet’s wife],”9 Ḥafiz Baṣrī evidently did not feel a need to justify Aghā-yi Buzurg’s status as a Sufi leader. This stance is intriguing from the perspective of gender history, since it is highly unusual for a Sufi community of that time to have been led by a female master. Indeed, were it not for the text’s use of Arabic loanwords with the feminine endings ḥ and ṣ, the context alone would not signal to the reader of the Mazḥar al-ʿajāʾīb that Aghā-yi Buzurg was female. Even though the title of aghā was used to refer to women of noble descent in the Mongol–Timurid context,10 the title “Aghā-yi Buzurg” can

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8 For further discussion of the issues raised in this section, see the introduction to the critical edition of the Mazḥar al-ʿajāʾīb: MA, 1–32.
9 MA, fol. 5b.
10 For more information on the use of this title, see the entry “Aghā” in Gerhard Doerfer, Türkische und Mongolische Elemente im Neupersischen, vol. I (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1963), 131–33.
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11 The appearance of female names with the title aghā was common during the Timurid period, when this title was applied to women affiliated to the court; see Isenbike Togan, “In Search of an Approach to the History of Women in Central Asia,” in Rethinking Central Asia: Non-Eurocentric Studies in History, Social-Structure and Identity, ed. Kokut Ertrurk (Cornell, NY: Ithaca Press, 1999), 173, 177. There is no direct evidence that Aghā-yi Buzurg had any affiliation to the ruling court. What we know from the Mażhar al-ajāʾ ib is that she had a special relationship with a wife of the Shibanid ruler Ūbaydullāh Khan, named Mogḥūl Khanīm, who was Aghā-yi Buzurg’s most powerful patron.


Despite growing interest in gender relations in Islamic societies, most studies focus on contemporary issues and overlook the historical dimensions of the question. The situation has not improved in the past three decades, even after the publication of Leila Ahmed’s Women and Gender in Islam, in which Ahmed noted the lack of studies on women’s history and the construction of gender in Islamic societies prior to the nineteenth century. Comprehensive examination of discourses on women and gender in premodern Muslim societies requires studying the societies in which gender was articulated and exploring the sociohistorical conditions in which these discourses were grounded. 12 Therefore, one of the central aims of this volume – to build a solid historical foundation for further
analysis of the complexities of gender in early modern Islamic Central Asia – is especially pressing.

This book does not merely present a summary of the Mazhar al-ʿajāʾib and flesh out the details of Aghā-yi Buzurg’s story through historical contextualization. It also attempts to trace and contextualize the diverse manifestations of gender history in Muslim societies, particularly in Central Asia, while paying close attention to the intersection of age and gender within historical Muslim discourse. As such, the study seeks to offer a framework for thinking about broader patterns of gender construction in early modern Muslim societies.

My approach is informed by several related literatures that form a compelling interdisciplinary array of studies of Sufism, the history of Central Asia, and women’s and gender studies. It draws on recent inquiries in these fields and contributes materially or theoretically to each. It may be helpful here to explain how I perceive and have developed the construction of the category of woman in relation to that of age. In this book, I analyze the category of woman presented in Muslim discourse without any pretense of universality or generalization through two subcategories: (1) sexualized women and (2) nonsexualized women. In essence, nonsexualized women stand outside the gendered hierarchy and, consequently, are treated differently compared with sexualized women, who abide within societal gendered norms and expectations of sexuality and childbirth. Depicting gender construction in this way reveals the change in the social and behavioral norms dictating how women should behave that occurs as women transition from one subcategory into another with age. In other words, the societal expectations of Muslim women’s gendered roles change as they become older, thereby inadvertently modifying their status in the public domain.

The current scholarship on women and gender in Muslim discourse overlooks the category of nonsexualized women. By overlooking female old age in the discussions on gendered rhetoric, we are left with an incomplete understanding of women in historical Muslim contexts. Within feminist scholarship on women and gender in Islam, there is a tendency to focus on fixed and unchanging notions of a universal woman – essentially, a sexually objectified woman of childbearing age. This universal woman with active female sexuality, as described by Fatima Mernissi, is “the most potentially dangerous woman . . . [for she] has experienced sexual intercourse.” A sexualized woman of childbearing age is deemed

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capable of causing social disorder through illicit sexual relationships, and thus this category is subject to gender restrictions and societal regulations to maintain order in society. Muslim feminist scholarship typically fixates on the sexualized woman while neglecting and failing to theorize the impact of aging and old age on gender construction. Consequently, old women have been mostly ignored and excluded from research questions and theoretical feminist approaches in gender-focused literature within Islamic studies. Without comprehensively contextualizing the link between gender and aging, we cannot further develop the discourse on gender history in Muslim contexts, and thus we cannot understand the complexity of models of female authority and leadership in the history of the Muslim world.

First, age serves a social organizing principle; second, different age groups gain identities and power in relation to one another; and third, age relations intersect with other power relations... The focus on age relations enables us to learn more about how all of our positions and experiences rest on power relations based on age.

Because the notion of sexuality is entangled with societal perceptions of age within Muslim discourse, we cannot further our understanding of the construction of gender ideals without thinking through the complexities of the intersection between aging and gender. Therefore, moving away from viewing the category of woman as fixed and constructing new frameworks to explore gender relations in Muslim discourse opens up new avenues for considering the transformation of the social mores imposed upon women as they pass from one category to another.


Beginning with the premise that societies prescribe modes of conduct and responsibilities on the basis of age,16 this study shows that gender regulations, societal restrictions, and segregation policies imposed upon sexually objectified, and thus dangerous, women in Muslim discourse are no longer applicable to aging and old women who are deemed no longer dangerous or capable of creating chaos in society.

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Old age is highly regarded in Islamic tradition, as evidenced in the Qur’an: “be kind to your parents. If either or both of them reach old age with you, say no word that shows impatience with them, and do not be harsh with them, but speak to them respectfully.”17 In particular, the Qur’an treats old women (ʿajūz) with dignity in the chapters (sūra) of Hūd 72, al-Shūʿarā’ 171, al-Ṣaffāt 135, and Al-Dhāriyāt 29.18 It also contains a verse that reads: “And women of postmenopausal age [al-qawāʿid min al-nisāʿ] who have no expectation of marriage – there is no blame upon them for putting aside their outer garments without openly displaying their adornment.”19 According to this verse, postmenopausal women – that is, old women who have undergone “the process of sexual disqualification,” as Susan Sontag put it20 – are not required to veil in public if they have no interest in marriage. Not only does the sacred book of Muslims exempt old women from the requirement of veiling, but it also consequentially sanctions old women’s visibility in public.

Such leeway in relation to nonsexualized women can be observed within Muslim legal discourses that allow old women (addressed as ʿajūz, ...
mutajalla, or barza) certain dispensations which are proscribed for sexually objectified young women (shabba). It is remarkable that Muslim legal scholars explicitly subcategorized the notion of woman, drawing a clear distinction between old and young women in their rulings.\(^\text{21}\) While the latter were subjected to restrictive gender segregation norms, old women were treated with less rigor regarding their public activities and interactions with non-related men in legal doctrinal texts. For instance, the Malikî school of law allows old women to share a meal with unrelated men, to interact directly with lower-ranking governmental officials,\(^\text{22}\) or to travel to Mecca to perform hajj pilgrimage without a male guardian.\(^\text{23}\) Although the twelfth-century Hanafî jurist Tahir b. Ahmad al-Bukhari prohibited old women from traveling without a male relative, he did not consider old women’s handshaking with unrelated old men (shuyib) provocative.\(^\text{24}\)

The Hanafî judges even admitted an old woman’s statement – as equal to a man’s – in verifying the credibility of a witness, on the grounds that old women were knowledgeable of public affairs due to their ability to socialize with a different kind of people, including unrelated men.\(^\text{25}\) Old women’s ability to develop companionship with unrelated men was also confirmed by the prominent Hanbali authority Ibn Qudama (d. 1223), who also specified that old women could manage their wealth without restrictions.\(^\text{26}\)

Furthermore, the well-known hadith of the Prophet Muhammad – “Do not forbid the female slaves of God from [praying in] the mosques of...

\(^{21}\) Some legal scholars went even further in their classification of the category of woman by distinguishing between ajzâ and mutajalla. See Abî al-Walîd Ibn Rushd al-Qurtubi, al-Bayân wa-l-tahlîl wa-l-sharh wa-l-tawjih wa-l-ta’llî fi masâ’il il-mustabkraja, ed. Muhammad Hajîjî, vol. I (Beirut: Dâr al-Gharb al-Islâmi, 1404/1984), 422.


\(^{23}\) al-Qaryawânî, Kitâb al-jâmi’, 283.


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God’s became a focal point of Muslim jurists’ debates concerning women’s access to the mosque and, consequently, to the public domain for centuries across the Muslim world. Despite the fact that women attended the mosque alongside men during the Prophet’s time, later scholars, especially those belonging to the Hanafi madhhab, fervently strove to exclude women from this male-dominated space. By the thirteenth century, the jurists belonging to the four prominent schools of Islamic law reached a consensus, recommending that young women – who are deemed capable of disturbing men’s concentration on God – should pray at home. Once again, old women were an exemption to the rule, as evidenced by the rulings of the prominent authorities of major four madhhab, according to which old women were given a dispensation to perform public prayers at mosques. Moreover, some jurists even

27 This report is found in highly regarded hadith collections, including the Sahih of al-Bukhārī and Muslim.