

POSITION PAPERS: INTRODUCTION

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WHITE: These position papers are intended to present our personal visions concerning the future of women in parapsychology.

In trying to decide the order of presentation, I first thought we might do it alphabetically, Lisette suggested we do it by seating order. This morning it occurred to me that we have a very apt symbolism here with the two tables, one on either side of the podium.

I ask you to think of the podium as the center. And to think of that center as the perfect blending of the feminine and masculine archetypes. But the center is empty—for though I am chairing from the podium, my chair is on the right. Let us be aware that we must do all we can to right the gender balance so that the center place can be filled, and thus give birth to a parapsychology that will live and grow.

I think we should start from the ends of each side and move toward the center to emphasize our intention to move toward the center in which both genders are coequal. Continuing with this symbolic approach, I think we should begin at the far left, because the right side is considered to be dominant, and as we represent the feminist side, one could say we are just beginning a feminist approach with the calling of this conference. Moreover, the left hand is considered to be the dreamer, and what we have expressed at this conference are our dreams. As we go forth from here, let us do all we can to make those dreams a reality!

Anjum—would you please begin?

PARAPSYCHOLOGY AND MUSLIM WOMEN: A CONTEMPORARY SCENARIO

ANJUM KHILJI

It is quite remarkable how in modern times Muslim women continue to play contributive roles in the propagation and transmission of *tasawwuf* (the mystical life). Some of these women are the most genuine representatives of sufi traditions and are directors of souls, exerting a remarkable influence upon small or large groups of seekers who find consolation and spiritual help in their presence. A quick survey of the contemporary Muslim world reveals that psi phenomena, by virtue of being by-products of religious experience, have not lost their value and positive social implications. Psi continues to be considered one of the "transmitted sciences." Since the religiosocial belief systems of the Islamic cultures have not undergone any drastic changes in the 20th century, psychic experiences successfully retain their designated status in these cultures. As active participants in these societies, women continue to play their respective roles in propagating and supporting psychic experiences. However, the list of the types of experiences (or *barakas*) seems to be more condensed and shorter compared to earlier lists. These *barakas* are now confined to true dreams; telepathic, clairvoyant, intuitive, and precognitive experiences; and healing practices.

Some changes have also occurred in the nature of the contributions women are making, thus reconstituting and redefining the functional groups. The first group is now comprised of a *murshidat*, or mystical school. These women are the members of formal sufi orders and are visited for counseling as well as to obtain blessings and make *Duas* (prayers), and treat physical ailments. Whether they are in a permanent blessed state (have traveled far enough on the sufi path to be able to assume that state "at will"), or in a temporary blessed state (have access to *barakas* while they are in the experiential state only), depends on the duration of their initiation and involvement in exercises. *Murshidat* are revered and respected equally by men and women and are consulted all the time for guidance and advice.

The second group of women, who can be called *bibian*, are not members of any sufi orders, but because of their rigorous exercises they are believed to be capable of performing *barakas*. They are also consulted for counseling and blessings. These two groups try to act unobtrusively; they shun any kind of publicity; and they do not accept any remuneration for the services they render. Humility and selflessness are their hallmarks.

The third group of women, the *saiyan*, can be regarded as a somewhat popular and less authentic version of the above-mentioned groups. These women are either family members of the institutionalized *pirs* (mentors or guides), or they have tried to set themselves up on a similar pattern. They profess to possess psychic faculties and often use these "powers" to control their followers and achieve their aims. They also accept *Nazr* and *Niyaz* (gifts of food and money presented by the petitioners).

Another version of *saiyan* is the group of women who claim to have powers of performing *tunas*. (In *tuna*, a woman tries to rid herself of ill fortune by transferring it to a goat's head and then releasing it in front of someone else's door. The misfortune is thought to pass on to the person who finds and picks up the head.) Women from this group often get themselves unofficially attached to different shrines and claim to act as an intermediary between the departed soul of the saint and the petitioners. They can go into trances, make requests to the saint on behalf of the needy people at the shrine, and report back with the saint's blessings and advice. Their audiences are usually prone to superstitions.

A fourth group consists of women who have experienced significant anomalous events in one form or another, are interested in psi phenomena, have a strong positive attitude towards it, and would like to explore it from a more objective and intellectual perspective. These women are members of study circles and can be the best collaborators for conducting any experimental research in their respective countries.

At this point I will make a quick assessment of the current situation in various countries. In some North African and Arab countries such as Egypt, Sudan Morocco, and Iraq, sufi orders are still quite active. Women such as Laila Aish (Morocco) and Syeda Um-Gameel (Egypt) have introduced their own philosophies within their sufi orders and are considered *murshidat* by their contemporaries. These countries are also quite rich with sanctuaries devoted to women saints that serve as

khanqahs (centers or convents) for female initiates of certain *silsilas* (sufi orders). The other three groups are also to be found in these countries.

Turkey boasts a great number of women representing various groups. There are a large number of *bibian* who are visited by people to express special wishes connected with conjugal life, children, and similar problems. In addition to the established sufi *silsilas* and their supportive roles in involving women in psi endeavors, there are institutions that are exploring psi phenomena using Western methodologies. The Metapsychic Investigation and Scientific Research Society in Istanbul is well known in Turkey for supporting women in their quest and research. Currently, a healing study is in progress with Emine Balkan participating as the subject. The Society is willing to collaborate with researchers who might be interested in conducting healing studies with Ms. Balkan.

In Jordan, one encounters very few *bibian*, whereas in Iran there are many *bibian* belonging to *Naimatullah Silsila*. In Iranian and Afghani rural areas, some *saiyan* are also present. In Pakistan all four groups are operating, with *saiyan* constituting the majority. This could be the result of having fewer established sufi orders compared to Turkey, Iran, or Egypt and more institutionalized pirs.

In the Muslim population of India and in Bangladesh, a pattern similar to that of Pakistan is prevalent. Indonesia and Malaysia appear to support a large number of women who are *bibian* and those who tend to be interested in the intellectual pursuit of the phenomena. This could be the result of Islamic University and schools operating in these countries. Indonesia's Zambrot, founded by Ruhana Zainab, an all-woman operation, stands out for its monumental role. Conceptual research on religious experiences and allied phenomena constitutes a part of the program offered at these institutions and provides a legitimate academic setting for their study.

This brief review may not do full justice to women's involvement in parapsychology; however, it is certainly representative of the current trends in Muslim countries. It is quite apparent that as long as Islam continues to be the predominant living philosophy of these countries, *barakas* will constitute an integral part of the religiosocial belief system. Muslim women who have acquired the status of educators, beginning with the advent of Islam, and who have played an important role in the

consolidation of its belief system, will also continue to be prominent propagators and transmitters of religious experiences and their related *barakas*.