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MÖMINƏ XATIN AS A METAPHYSICAL SYMBOL OF AZERBAIJANI FEMALE SUFISM: A HISTORICAL, ARCHITECTURAL, AND MYSTICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract. This article examines Möminə Xatın as a metaphysical symbol of Azerbaijani female Sufism through an interdisciplinary analysis combining historical, architectural, and mystical perspectives. Within the broader framework of Sufi philosophy, the feminine is conceptualized as a central metaphysical principle associated with divine love, illumination, and spiritual proximity. The study explores how this theoretical understanding is embodied in the figure of Möminə Xatın, a prominent historical personality of the 12th-century Eldiguzid state, whose influence extended beyond political structures into the realm of moral and spiritual authority.

Particular attention is given to the Möminə Xatın Mausoleum as an architectural manifestation of Sufi cosmology. Its geometric design, symbolic ornamentation, and spatial composition are interpreted as expressions of metaphysical concepts such as unity, transcendence, and the journey of the soul. Furthermore, the article introduces the notion of “silent Sufism” to describe Möminə Xatın’s non-textual spiritual legacy, which is conveyed through cultural memory, ethical influence, and symbolic continuity rather than written discourse.

The study concludes that Möminə Xatın represents a unique synthesis of gender, spirituality, and cultural identity, demonstrating the enduring role of women as carriers of metaphysical meaning in Azerbaijani and Islamic intellectual traditions.

Key words: Sufism; Möminə Xatın; feminine metaphysics; Islamic architecture; divine love; silent Sufism; Azerbaijani cultural heritage.

Introduction. Within the intellectual and spiritual history of Islamic civilization, Sufism represents not merely a religious movement but a profound metaphysical system that reinterprets the relationship between human beings, existence, and the Divine. It offers a holistic vision of reality in which the material and spiritual realms are deeply interconnected, and where the ultimate purpose of human existence is the attainment of divine knowledge and inner purification. Central to Sufi ontology is the notion that human value is not determined by gender, social hierarchy, or material status, but by spiritual realization (*ma‘rifa*) and proximity to God (Quliyev, 2010). This perspective establishes a universal spiritual equality that transcends external distinctions and emphasizes the inner journey of the soul.

In this framework, the concept of woman transcends juridical and social limitations and becomes associated with divine qualities such as compassion, illumination, and love. The feminine is often symbolically linked with receptivity to divine grace and the manifestation of mercy, reflecting one of the essential attributes of God. This symbolic elevation of the feminine is not merely theoretical but finds expression in cultural, literary, and architectural forms across the Islamic world, where women are represented as both spiritual guides and metaphysical symbols.

One of the most compelling embodiments of this synthesis is the Möminə Xatın Mausoleum in Nakhchivan, constructed in the 12th century. This monument is not only an architectural masterpiece but also a metaphysical text encoded in stone, reflecting the spiritual and symbolic role of a woman within the Azerbaijani Sufi worldview (Aliyev, 2002). Its design, ornamentation, and symbolic structure collectively convey a deeper philosophical narrative about life, death, and transcendence.

This article aims to analyze Möminə Xatın as a metaphysical symbol of Azerbaijani female Sufism by integrating historical, architectural, and mystical perspectives, while also situating her legacy within the broader discourse of Islamic metaphysical thought.

Theoretical Framework: Sufism and the Concept of Woman

Sufism conceptualizes the human being as the vicegerent (khalifa) of God on Earth, whose essence lies beyond physical and gender distinctions. In classical Sufi metaphysics, the soul is inherently genderless, and spiritual realization is equally accessible to all (Ibn Arabi, 1946). This understanding reinforces the idea that the true identity of a human being is defined not by bodily form but by spiritual capacity and inner awareness.

Women in Sufi discourse are frequently associated with key metaphysical concepts such as Ishq (Divine Love), Nur (Divine Light), Ma'rifa (Gnosis), Fana (Annihilation of the ego), and Baqa (Subsistence in God). These associations elevate the feminine from a passive social role to an active metaphysical principle. The feminine becomes a symbol of receptivity to divine truth and a medium through which spiritual knowledge manifests.

This theoretical shift distinguishes Sufism from more rigid legalistic interpretations of Islam and allows for a more inclusive and universal spiritual anthropology, emphasizing inner transformation over external identity (Attar, 1961).

Discussion.

Female Spiritual Authority in Sufi Thought

The most prominent example of female spiritual authority in Sufism is Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya, whose doctrine of unconditional divine love revolutionized Islamic spirituality. She rejected the dual motivations of fear (hell) and reward (paradise), asserting that true devotion must be grounded solely in love for God (Attar, 1961). In doing so, she introduced a radical reorientation of religious consciousness, shifting the focus from external compliance to inner sincerity and emotional purity. Her teachings emphasize that divine love is not transactional but absolute, requiring complete detachment from worldly expectations. This detachment (zuhd) was not merely ascetic withdrawal but an active cultivation of inner freedom, allowing the seeker to transcend ego-centered desires and attain proximity to the Divine.

Her famous prayer encapsulates this philosophy:

“If I worship You for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell... but if I worship You for Your own sake, do not withhold from me Your Eternal Beauty.” This statement reflects a profound metaphysical understanding in which love becomes both the path and the *maqṣad* (ultimate goal) of spiritual realization. It also anticipates later Sufi epistemology, where knowledge of God (*ma'rifa*) is attained not through rational inquiry alone but through experiential love and annihilation of the self (*fanā*).

This perspective repositioned the woman not as a passive follower but as a creator of spiritual paradigms. Rābi'a's legacy influenced major Sufi thinkers such as Ibn Arabi, who further developed the idea of the feminine as a locus of divine manifestation (Ibn Arabi, 1946). In his metaphysical framework, the feminine symbolizes receptivity and completeness, embodying the mirror through which divine beauty is revealed. Moreover, her thought contributed to the broader Sufi discourse on the unity of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) and the transformative power of love as an ontological principle.

Thus, within Sufism, women are not marginal figures but central actors in the construction of metaphysical knowledge, embodying both the experiential and theoretical dimensions of spiritual truth. Their contributions challenge conventional gender hierarchies and affirm the universality of spiritual potential, demonstrating that proximity to the Divine transcends social and biological distinctions.

Möminə Xatın lived during the 12th century as the wife of Shams al-Din Eldiguz, founder of the Eldiguzid (Atabeg) state, and the mother of Jahan Pahlavan, a prominent ruler. Historical sources portray her not merely as a political consort but as a moral and spiritual pillar within the ruling structure (Bunyadov, 1985). Her presence within the court reflects a model of leadership in which influence is exercised not through formal authority alone, but through ethical guidance and spiritual integrity, fostering a culture of justice, wisdom, and balanced governance. In this regard, she can be seen as embodying a form of “invisible authority,” where legitimacy is derived from moral credibility rather than institutional power.

Her role exemplifies the Sufi concept of *zahir–batin* unity, where outward authority is balanced by inner spiritual depth. She functioned as a stabilizing force within the political sphere, ensuring that governance was aligned with ethical and spiritual principles. This dual role highlights her significance not only in political history but also in the metaphysical imagination of the period, where rulers were expected to embody both temporal power and spiritual responsibility, serving as both leaders and moral exemplars. Such a framework resonates with broader Islamic political thought, in which justice (*‘adl*) is inseparable from spiritual consciousness.

Furthermore, Möminə Xatın’s influence can be interpreted through the lens of gendered authority in medieval Islamic societies, where women often exercised power through advisory, educational, and symbolic roles. Her example challenges reductive assumptions about female passivity, illustrating instead a dynamic participation in governance and intellectual culture. The construction of her mausoleum after her death signifies not only commemoration but also sanctification – transforming her memory into a lasting metaphysical presence. This architectural act reflects the medieval understanding of sacred space as a bridge between the temporal and the eternal.

In this sense, the monument serves as a symbolic extension of her spiritual authority, preserving her legacy within both historical consciousness and sacred space, while reinforcing her enduring influence across generations and cultural narratives. It also invites interpretation within the broader discourse of memory studies, where monuments function as carriers of collective identity and spiritual continuity.

The mausoleum was designed by the renowned architect Ajami Nakhchivani, one of the leading figures of medieval Islamic architecture (Kazimoglu, 2018). The structure embodies Sufi cosmology through its design elements: – Decagonal plan → symbolizes cosmic harmony

– Vertical elevation → represents spiritual ascent (*sayr wa suluk*) – Calligraphic inscriptions (Kufic and Naskh) → reflect *dhikr* (remembrance of God) – Ornamental rhythm → expresses divine order and unity

In addition to these features, the careful proportional balance of the structure reflects the mathematical precision often associated with Islamic metaphysical thought. The use of geometric patterns not only enhances aesthetic beauty but also serves as a visual representation of infinity and divine unity. Light and shadow interacting across the surface further reinforce the dynamic relationship between the visible and the invisible realms. The architectural composition transforms the mausoleum into a symbolic journey from the material to the spiritual realm. It is not merely a tomb but a metaphysical diagram of existence, where each structural element contributes to a deeper philosophical narrative about the unity of creation and the transcendence of the soul beyond physical limitations.

From a Sufi perspective, architecture can function as a medium of spiritual communication. The Möminə Xatın Mausoleum exemplifies this by encoding metaphysical meanings into spatial and geometric forms. In this context, architecture is not merely a physical construct but a symbolic language through which abstract spiritual concepts are made perceptible. Each element of the structure participates in conveying a deeper ontological message about existence and transcendence, transforming the built environment into a site of contemplative experience.

The transition from horizontal stability to vertical expansion mirrors the Sufi path from worldly attachment to divine proximity. This vertical symbolism can be interpreted as an architectural representation of spiritual ascent (*mi‘raj*), guiding the observer from multiplicity toward unity. The repetitive patterns evoke the infinite nature of God, while the inscriptions serve as a constant reminder of divine presence. Furthermore, the harmony between geometric precision and artistic ornamentation reflects the unity between *‘aql* (intellect) and heart in Sufi epistemology, suggesting that true knowledge emerges from their integration rather than opposition.

Moreover, the spatial organization of the mausoleum encourages a phenomenological engagement, where the visitor becomes an active participant in the experience of meaning. Movement

through the space mirrors an inner journey, reinforcing the Sufi idea that external forms are reflections of internal realities. The interplay of light and shadow further enhances this dynamic, symbolizing the unveiling (*kashf*) of hidden truths.

Thus, the structure operates as a liminal space – a threshold between the temporal and the eternal. It represents the transformation of the physical body into spiritual permanence, guiding the observer toward contemplation, introspection, and an awareness of the eternal dimensions of existence beyond material reality. In this sense, the mausoleum is not only a monument of memory but also a pedagogical space that silently instructs the soul in the language of transcendence.

Unlike figures such as Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya, Möminə Xatın did not leave behind written mystical treatises or participate in formal Sufi circles. However, from a Sufi epistemological standpoint, silence does not negate spirituality. On the contrary, silence can be understood as a higher form of expression, where meaning is conveyed through presence, action, and inner state rather than articulated discourse. In many Sufi traditions, silence (*samt*) is associated with spiritual maturity, indicating a state in which truth is internalized rather than verbalized.

The principle of “the inward surpasses the outward” allows for the recognition of non-verbal forms of mysticism. Möminə Xatın’s spiritual legacy is expressed through:

- her role in shaping a moral-political environment;
- the symbolic meaning of her commemorative architecture;
- the enduring cultural memory associated with her name.

These dimensions reveal a form of spirituality embedded within lived experience rather than theoretical exposition. Her influence extends beyond her historical lifetime, becoming part of a collective metaphysical consciousness that continues to inspire cultural and spiritual reflection. This continuity aligns with Sufi notions of *baraka* (spiritual blessing), whereby the presence of a righteous individual radiates influence across time and space.

This can be described as “silent Sufism” – a mode of spiritual presence that manifests through action, environment, and symbolic continuity rather than textual production. It reflects an epistemology grounded in embodiment, where knowledge is lived rather than written, and where ethical conduct becomes a form of spiritual discourse. In this sense, Möminə Xatın’s legacy demonstrates that absence of textuality does not imply absence of depth, but rather points to an alternative, experiential mode of knowing rooted in being rather than saying.

The legacy of Möminə Xatın continues into modern times as part of Azerbaijan’s cultural and spiritual heritage. The restoration of her mausoleum by state initiative demonstrates the ongoing recognition of female contributions to national identity and spiritual history. This act of preservation is not merely an architectural intervention but also a symbolic reaffirmation of historical memory and cultural continuity across generations. It reflects a conscious engagement with the past, where heritage sites function as anchors of identity in an increasingly globalized world.

This continuity reflects a broader cultural pattern in which women are perceived not only as social actors but also as carriers of sacred meaning. Their roles extend beyond familial and societal functions into the realm of spiritual symbolism and metaphysical representation. In this sense, the Azerbaijani context preserves a unique synthesis of gender, spirituality, and cultural expression, where historical female figures are integrated into national narratives as embodiments of ethical and spiritual ideals.

Moreover, this enduring legacy contributes to contemporary discussions on gender and identity, offering a historical model in which feminine presence is associated with wisdom, moral authority, and spiritual depth. It challenges modern dichotomies between tradition and progress by demonstrating that historical paradigms can inform present-day discourses on inclusivity and representation.

Additionally, the preservation of such monuments underscores the importance of safeguarding both tangible and intangible heritage, ensuring that the philosophical, symbolic, and spiritual dimensions of figures like Möminə Xatın remain accessible and meaningful. This process transforms

heritage into a living discourse, where past and present continuously interact, enriching both academic inquiry and collective cultural consciousness.

Conclusion. In Sufi thought, the feminine is not a marginal category but a central metaphysical principle associated with love, illumination, and divine proximity. This conceptual framework provided the intellectual foundation for the elevated status of women in medieval Azerbaijani culture. It also enabled a broader interpretation of spiritual authority, where inner virtue and metaphysical awareness were prioritized over external distinctions and social hierarchies.

Möminə Xatın represents a unique embodiment of this tradition. While she did not produce written mystical works, her life, influence, and commemorative architecture position her as a powerful symbol of spiritual authority. Her legacy illustrates how spiritual presence can be expressed through lived experience and cultural memory rather than textual articulation.

The Möminə Xatın Mausoleum stands as a testament to the enduring connection between material form and metaphysical meaning. It transforms memory into permanence and elevates the feminine into a universal symbol of divine love, while also serving as a lasting cultural and philosophical reference point that continues to inspire scholarly inquiry, artistic interpretation, and a deeper understanding of the intersection between gender, spirituality, and historical identity.

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