The Birth of a Celestial Light

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A Feminist Evaluation of an Iranian Spiritual Movement Inter-universal Mysticism

By

Tina Eftekhar

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به نام بی نام او بیا تا شروع کنیم

در امتداد شب نشینیم و طلوع کنیم

مهم نیست چگونه، چطور و چند

به یک تلنگر ساده بیا تا رجوع کنیم

ببین که خاک چگونه به سجده افتاده

چرا غرور و تفاخر بیا تا رکوع کنیم

(محمد علی طاهری)

Let's start in the name of nameless

Sit along the night and rise like a sun

No matter how

Let's go back with a simple fillip

See how the land lay prostrate

Why having vanity, let's bow

(Mohammad Ali Taheri)

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FOREWORD

SHIRIN EBADI,
NOBEL PEACE LAUREATE

TRANSLATED BY HADI KHOJINIAN

Patriarchy in the Middle East has ancient roots. By patriarchy, I am not referring to culture of masculinity, but a culture that does not believe in equality and the slogan of "ALL FOR ONE AND ONE FOR ALL" is engraved at the heart of this culture. This is why patriarchy is at odds with democracy.

Many of the present day crises in the Middle East have their roots in patriarchy. The culture of patriarchy justifies itself by finding any excuses such as religion. This is why in a country like Iran, where over 60% of its university students are female, and where it is over 50 years since women were given the right to vote and become members of parliament, still the testimony of two women is needed to equal that of one man in a court of law; a man can be married to four wives at the same time and divorce their wives at will, but it is very difficult, and at times impossible, for wives to divorce their husbands.

It is quite natural that such rules will work towards strengthening and supporting the patriarchal culture. Iranian women have tried in every possible way to empower themselves to counter patriarchy and its discriminations. Whenever women object to these discriminatory rules, authorities, by pointing to Islamic Sharia law and its various interpretations, call them blasphemous.

Women are therefore looking for a way to continue to fight these discriminations, without being accused of blasphemy. One way has been for women to follow individuals or movements that have moderate and more modern interpretations of Islamic laws to empower themselves. In this way they can withstand the unjust accusations of blasphemy and prove that with correct interpretations of Islam they can put an end to discrimination against women in both the society and the law of the country.

This book is an in-depth research and documentation of such women's activism. Through reading this book the reader will have a better understanding of why mystical/spiritual movements receive much more attention in the Middles East.

مقدمه

خانم شیرین عبادی برنده جایزه صلح نوبل

فرهنگ پدر سالار در مشرق زمین، ریشه ای دیرینه دارد. منظور من از فرهنگ پدر سالار، جنس مذکر نیست، منظور فرهنگ نادرستی است که برابری انسان ها را قبول ندارد و شعار "همه برای یکی و یکی برای همه" در دل این فرهنگ نهفته است و بهمین دلیل است که فرهنگ پدر سالار با دموکراسی سازگار نیست.

ریشه بسیاری از تنش های موجود در خاورمیانه را می توان در فرهنگ پدر سالار جستجو کرد. فرهنگ پدر سالار برای توجیه خود از هر موضوعی از جمله مذهب استفاده می کند و بدین گونه است که فرضا در کشور ایران، ارزش شهادت دو زن در دادگاه معادل با شهادت یک مرد است، مرد می تواند چهار زن بگیرد و هر وقت بخواهد بدون عذر موجه زنش را طلاق دهد اما طلاق گرفتن برای زن بسیار دشوار و گاه غیر ممکن است. این قوانین تبعیض آمیز در کشوری اجرا می شود که بیش از ۶۰٪ دانشجویان آن دختر هستند و زنان ایرانی بیش از 50 سال است که حق رای به دست آورده و به پارلمان رفته اند.

طبیعی است که چنین قوانینی باعث اشاعه و تقویت هر چه بیشتر فرهنگ پدر سالار می شود و زنان ایران برای مقابله با فرهنگ پدر سالار و قوانین تبعیض آمیز ناشی از آن به هر شیوه ممکن در توانمند سازی خود و مقابله با وضعیت موجود کوشیده اند. زنان وقتی به قوانین تبعیض آمیز و ضد زن اعتراض می کنند، حکومت به قوانین شریعت استناد کرده و مخالفین را مرتد می داند.

بنا بر این زنها به دنبال راه حلی هستند که بدون آن که در معرض اتهام ارتداد قرار گیرند، به مبارزه با فرهنگ پدر سالار برخیزند. یکی از این راه حل ها پیروی از افراد یا گروههایی است که تفسیر ملایم و جدیدی از اسلام دارند و بدین گونه زنان خود را توانمند می سازند که در قبال حربه "ارتداد" حکومت ایستاده و ثابت کنند که با تفسیر درستی از اسلام می توان به وضعیت تبعیض آمیز زنان در قانون و در اجتماع پایان داد.

کتاب حاضر تحقیقی است جامع و مستند راجع به قسمتی از این گونه تلاش های زنان. با خواندن آن متوجه می شوید که چرا گروههای مختلف "عرفان" این چنین در مشرق زمین پر طرفدار هستند.

PREFACE

> It was a big apartment with a nice garden in front of it: the hall was on the ground floor of the building. A crowd of people were chatting, standing all the way from the entrance of the building to the hall so that I could hardly pass them to reach the reception area. At the entrance of the hall, there was a table and two ladies were sitting behind it; they were checking everyone's membership cards to allow them permission to enter. After waiting in a long queue, I showed my card and went inside. At first glance, I saw a large number of people. All the seats (approximately 500) were taken and many people were sitting on the floor and near the walls. There was a small open kitchen in a corner of the hall, full of women. The hall was equipped with three roll-down projection screens allowing everyone to see and hear the speaker, Mr Taheri. I was surprised by what I was observing. Only the three back rows were occupied by men: all the other seats were taken by women. Women were more active in the class than men; they were enthusiastically sharing their experiences and asking Mr. Taheri questions. They were even talking openly about their families and private problems in front of others, which they were unlikely to do in other situations. At the end of the six hour class nobody seemed tired. It was late in the evening and women were still asking questions. I thought it was really intriguing that women were staying after the class and continuing the discussion; it seemed as though they were achieving something for themselves in a society where women are expected to put family or home first. I looked at all these women and asked myself, why are they all here? What are they looking for in a class like this on spirituality?

I encountered this scene in 2007, when I was visiting Iran for two weeks, and it sparked my curiosity and interest so much that it led me to the topic of my doctoral research and then this book. As I reflected on the scene, some questions began to occur to me: Why do some women choose to follow this spiritual movement, *Inter-universal Mysticism*, in Iran? What does spirituality mean to them? How is spirituality understood and experienced in their lives? To what extent and how does their participation in such a movement transform or change their lives? Is there any relationship between the remarkable number of women within this movement and feminism?

In order to understand the connection between spirituality and the high number of female participants in *Inter-universal Mysticism*, after a period of reading, planning and reflection, I planned and carried out a qualitative

study of women of different ages and social backgrounds within this movement in three Iranian cities, Tehran, Yazd and Mashhad, between April and July 2010. As the research progressed, I became interested in expanding the study to investigate the relevance of feminism to these women's experiences. My aims at the beginning of the study were deliberately broad: to discover the connection between women's participation in this movement and feminism in Iran. Through further study, significant themes emerged and shaped my approach to exploring how, and to what extent, this spiritual movement might change an Iranian woman's life.

My own life story and route to my book are relevant to this project. I was born in 1981, two years after the Islamic revolution, in Tehran, the capital city of Iran. Like many women born since 1979 I grew up in a world where, on the one hand, there are diverse modern opportunities but where, on the other hand, Iranians must deal with the constricting and intrusive official interference of the Islamic regime. I was raised in a very modern and westernised family which was at odds with what seemed, to me, a restrictive Islamic official culture: a challenging experience for me as I matured. For example, I used to attend private dance classes and mixed parties without wearing a hijab, yet our religious teachers at school told us that if we listened to music our ears would be burned in hell, or that if we showed one strand of hair we would be hanged by that in hell. This contradictory experience is one which I share with many of the women I interviewed for this study. As a result of these conflicting messages, like some of the women in my study I began to question the life I was living and started to ask myself: Who am I? What is the purpose of my life? What is my mission in this world? These questions led me to search within different religions and spiritual movements, until eventually I learnt about *Inter-universal Mysticism*.

When I joined *Inter-universal Mysticism* in 2005, it was a relatively new public movement. Although founded in Iran by Mohammad Ali Taheri thirty years ago, Taheri had only been teaching public classes for a couple of years and the movement was not as well-known as others, such as meditation and reiki which had been introduced to Iran in the 1990s. I heard about *Inter-universal Mysticism* from one of my close and pious Muslim friends with a similar interest as myself in the path of *erfan*/mysticism. The popularity of *Inter-universal Mysticism* developed through word of mouth, and the majority of the women in my study heard about it from family members, relatives or friends. At first, I thought *Inter-universal Mysticism* was intended for groups of people to discuss matters of Shia Muslim doctrine, ritual and practices, but I then discovered that it

is a modern religious or spiritual movement which has a relationship to the traditional path of *erfan*, but which goes beyond those understandings. Interestingly, I later found that my perceptions were common to many women in my study, who also did not initially realise that *Inter-universal Mysticism* is about *erfan*/mysticism; most of my interviewees, particularly in Yazd, assumed at first that it was about healing, calling it *faradarmani*/ the spiritual healing on this path. Although I had some initial doubts which made me cautious about progressing within the movement, I eventually became a Master[1] in *Inter-universal Mysticism* after one year of study. In 2006, I came to the UK to undertake post-graduate study in human rights. At that point I thought of *erfan* or spirituality as a personal interest, little imagining that one day I might teach it or conduct academic research and eventually write a book in the field.

After living in the UK for a year and half, I travelled back to Iran for a brief visit in winter 2007. I was looking forward to meeting Mr Taheri and my friends in the *Inter-universal Mysticism* movement. I had heard that because of the increase in the number of participants, the classes had been relocated from a room in an office in one of the less affluent areas of Tehran to a big hall in a more expensive area of the city. The event I described above took place on a day when I decided to go to one of the highest-level classes (Level eight) to visit Mr Taheri and some of my friends. I mention which level of the class I was attending because it is important to note the large number of women who reached this high stage on the path. In contrast to my previous experiences of class attendance, when there were just 20 participants in the class with approximately equal numbers of men and women, all of whom were well-educated and mostly pious Muslims, this time I noticed a large increase in the overall number of participants and a much higher proportion of women. It should be noted that I observed men and women sitting separately even if they were related, with women wearing Islamic hijabs. On previous occasions when I had attended these classes, women wore loose scarves and sat next to men and the atmosphere was relaxed. The more recent session was formal in other ways: the teacher, Mr. Taheri, used technology including PowerPoint and the class was more like a formal seminar than a spiritual class. Recent restrictions on spiritual movements suggest a clear reason why the informal atmosphere of these classes has changed into a more formal academic style. This prompted me to consider the changes that had

[1] Master is a title given to anyone who has passed six levels in *Inter-universal Mysticism* and becomes qualified to teach its lessons to others.

occurred in the last two years. How had *erfan* become so popular, particularly among women? Drawing on my own experience, I began to consider both the gendering of spirituality in Iran and, in particular, the predominance of women on the *Inter-universal Mysticism* path in the second decade of the twenty-first century: these became the central concerns of my study. This short autobiography reveals how my own experience places me in a position where I can comment on, and empathise with the situations of the women I have studied. Both I and the women I interviewed are Iranian women with shared experience, language and ideas who have followed the same mystical or spiritual path. While my own understanding and lived experience as a Master on this path give me important insights, my understanding of how to conduct academic feminist research and my experience of living outside Iran allows me to use those perceptions reflexively and to comment as an outsider.

Here I should acknowledge that this study is the first academic study on *Inter-universal Mysticism* itself not its healing and is only about women inside the path and I did not expect these women's stories to all be so positive. Although I could have interviewed women who were not interested in joining the movement but were practicing its spirituality, I was not able to find any woman who had left the path, and therefore there may have been more critical stories which are not reflected here. Yet, my intention is not to construct a pro-*Inter-universal Mysticism* argument, but to study the experiences of women within *Inter-universal Mysticism* through a feminist lens.

In short, this qualitative study endeavours to broaden discourses about women in Iran by examining the link between spirituality, coping, and meaning-making in the lives of a sample of women involved with *Inter-universal Mysticism*. The novel contribution of the study is not simply to extend the range of contexts in which gender can be analysed but rather, through the lens of feminism, to demonstrate the significance of women's choice of spirituality as an investigative issue which can elucidate women's wider social, cultural and political processes in contemporary Iran. My main objective in studying women on the path of *Inter-universal Mysticism* is to demonstrate how spirituality rather than religion (Shia Islam) affects women's lives and self-empowerment. Analysis of my data revealed convergences between the practice of *Inter-universal Mysticism* and women's self-empowerment, or rather their movement towards what they experience as greater authenticity or a more authentic self. This aspect of women's lives has not been studied yet and in this way my approach differs from existing work on Iranian women's lives after the Islamic revolution. In other words, understandings of the spiritual lives of

Iranian women are limited in current studies on Iran, and that this study therefore offers a new and original contribution to the existing scholarship on women in Iran and to spirituality studies.[2]

[2] This study is about the everyday lives of women in Iran who have understandings of spirituality in a very different context to most of the other studies, which are mainly about spirituality in the west.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must acknowledge that many people have contributed to the writing of this study, from initial conception through to completion. Most significantly, it has been primarily shaped by the participants – the women who gave up their time to talk with me and share their experiences and stories. I am very grateful to them all for their contributions.

A great deal of thanks is also due to Nahid, one of the most dedicated Masters of *Inter-universal Mysticism* who provided me with extensive help and support in carrying out my field work during such a strict political situation. She has been encouraging and for that I am eternally thankful.

The enthusiasm of two people, my inspiring supervisors Dr Joanna de Groot and Dr Ann Kaloski Naylor, have not only kept the whole process going, but also made it rewarding and enjoyable. They have advised, supported and guided me throughout and I am very thankful for having had them as my mentors.

I am also indebted to my parents for their kindness and invaluable supports both financially and emotionally. Thank you both for being persistent and encouraging, for believing in me, and for the many precious lessons you thought me along the way.

Finally, I could never have embarked upon this book, or kept going, without the love, help and care of my wonderful husband, Amirhossein SadrFaridpour – you are the best.

INTRODUCTION

It is striking that women in Iran are increasingly choosing to follow spiritual paths which differ from conventional Iranian Shia Islam. Although there is no written or other accessible evidence to support this statement, due to censorship and restrictions on unofficial movements, my recent experience of urban life in Iran and my conversations with other Iranians has led me to think that there is an increasing interest in spirituality, at least in bigger cities, particularly among young people and women. Young people are increasingly joining different schools of *erfan*/mysticism, one of which is *Inter-universal Mysticism*, because on such paths they can find a greater freedom to form their own way of life and belief. In her 2006 BBC News report, "Growing popularity of Sufism in Iran", Saberi states that "nowadays, hundreds of young Iranians are increasingly joining *erfani* groups… because Official religion has a series of limitations, and its limitations are much stricter than *erfan*"[3]. However, mainstream media, both online and in print, such as newspapers, magazines and weblogs, are not allowed to mention this growing movement because, in the government's view, it constitutes evil thought and is anti-Islamic. The purpose of my research was to investigate the self-perception of Iranian women involved in one of the most recognised of these movements in Iran, known as *Inter-universal Mysticism*. I contend that it is so well-known not only because of its large numbers of followers but also because it has been the target of public attack by the government, which has increased public awareness of *Inter-universal Mysticism*.

This book deals with women's subjective evaluations of their situation in Iran following their choice to participate in *Inter-universal Mysticism* since 2002. In this book, I present the findings of my study and evaluate 55 women's narratives of their experiences inside this movement: stories which reflect their desire for change in their lives. Along with the interview material I include observations of meetings, and ideas gleaned from four discussion groups I organised, in three cities in Iran – Tehran, Yazd and Mashhad – in which women discussed the influence of this movement in their lives. Throughout this book I argue that women's participation within *Inter-universal Mysticism* creates spaces to deal with

[3] Saberi, 2006, n.p.

their life experiences in current Iranian society, to cope with the difficulties they encounter, and to resist the limitations placed upon them. The women's narratives here are analysed in relation to a framework of feminist ideas, which interprets their ideas and experiences within a wider theoretical context. I have tried to articulate women's own interpretations of spirituality in their lives, and to understand their beliefs and actions in relation to *Inter-universal Mysticism*. My feminist approach allows for a fuller understanding of these Iranian women's realities, which are complex and sometimes contradictory.

I offer a narrative of Iranian society and its gender ideology after the Islamic revolution, which helps to demonstrate how Taheri's movement has developed with a particularly large number of women as its followers. In fact, any study of women living in Iran in the last 35 years, not just the ones I studied, requires an understanding of the ambiguities in the position of women. The revolution's impact on women in particular has been paradoxical, as it has both opened up new possibilities for them and at the same time instituted the most repressive controls on their lives. Women from various classes were active participants in the events leading to the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime in 1979. They joined the revolutionary (anti-shah) movements for a variety of reasons, religious and secular, economic and political, in the expectation that the revolution would not only defeat the Shah[4], but also would lead to the growth and development of women's status and opportunities[5]. But they soon discovered that the Islamic regime had its own agenda for women.

The situation of women in post-1979 Iran is rather contradictory: on the one hand, they have to cope with a regime which has a political gender agenda that is very powerful and constraining, part of which is reinforced by tradition and existing practices; on the other hand, it is a regime that set women up as part of its own constituency, since it celebrated the role of women in the revolution and changing the regime, and used women's skills and labour in periods of war. The new Islamic regime has involved itself in creative practices in which it has opened up spaces for women's religious education and education more generally. The women, who appear in this study like other Iranian women, are women who are constantly negotiating these contradictions. Most Iranian women, whether or not they participate in *Inter-universal Mysticism*, have been picking their way through this contradictory environment either by negotiation or resistance. I show how women have created spaces or negotiated different

[4] Shah is the title given to kings of Iran.
[5] Esfandiari, 1997.

outcomes from the ones the regime might have intended. I conclude that the development of spiritual paths like *Inter-universal Mysticism* after the Islamic revolution provides insights into a society that is complex and disillusioned with unfulfilled religious revolutionary goals. Women's choice of this movement is one of the ways in which women, as both social and political actors, express their critical dissatisfaction with the regime and challenge patriarchal and gendered relations in Iran in both the public and the private spheres.

The paradoxical situation of women in Iran since the Islamic revolution has inspired much research on the diversity of Iranian women's lives and struggles. On the one hand, these studies represent the lives of Iranian women as shaped by adversity and on the other, they look at how women challenge the current official Islamic gender ideology. Women in Iran employ myriad strategies to cope, to resist and to defeat the impact of the official Islamic norms imposed upon them, including their dress, work and public presence. However, despite considerable evidence regarding the commanding roles of spiritual practices (e.g. prayer) and spirituality in the lives of Iranian women, explorations of the spiritual lives of women in Iran remain limited. Much has been written on the experience or participation of men in Sufism and the path of *erfan*/mysticism, but women's spiritual activities in Iran have not received the attention they deserve: this is the main focus of this study. Those studies that do consider women and religion are primarily concerned with the history or the social and political functions of Islam and discuss women's roles or ideologies as projected or reproduced in religious contexts, rather than being concerned with women's spirituality as an analytic category in the sense undertaken here.

My approach differs significantly from that of existing scholarship on women in Iran. Scholars such as Friedl (1989) in *Women of Deh Koh: lives in an Iranian village*, and Torab (2006) in *Performing Islam: gender and ritual in Iran,* adopt anthropological approaches to women, religion and spirituality but, although I have used participant observation, my overall approach is different due to my distinctive insider-outsider position. In this study spirituality and religion are understood as overlapping but distinct categories of analysis and experience. Religion is conceptualized as an organized socio-cultural-historical system with rules, doctrines and practices, while spirituality is understood as an individual's personal quest to experience a close relationship with a higher power (e.g. God), seeking a meaningful life and a feeling of interconnectedness with the whole world. I examine spirituality within a particular school of thought – *Inter-universal Mysticism* – within which spirituality and religious belief can be

interrelated. Spirituality, which is the achievement of *kamal*/perfection and fulfilment on this path, can be combined with religion "if the beliefs and experiences that are considered to be an aspect of traditional religion like prayer or reading holy books"[6], are linked to an individual's search for the divine or ultimate truth. My study also suggests that spirituality takes on a different sense when the lived experiences of women are in conflict with powerfully gendered religious ideologies in Iran. The spirituality of women in the *Inter-universal Mysticism* movement is associated with self-awareness, self-defined identity, inner strength, peace, and the clarification of core values and beliefs. It seems that it is the spirituality in this movement, rather than their Islamic religion, which has enabled these women to manage and negotiate the relationship between their personal aspirations and needs, cultural and family influences, and official religious demands and pressures.

In this study, I combine my personal interest in the lives of women in Iran, and the particular lives of women on the path of *Inter-universal Mysticism*, with an intellectual understanding of women's involvement in this spiritual movement. As King (1993) argues, while feminism is an important social and political movement, spirituality has a long history as a human quest to seek fulfilment, liberation and achieve perfection. I further seek to explore the relationship between spirituality and women's life transformations in Iran from a feminist viewpoint. For these purposes, I define feminism as the concern for the welfare and autonomy of women, which implies a principle relevant to all feminisms. My own feminism urges me to question the difficulties and disadvantages which women in Iran currently face, and "to interpret women's experiences in relation to patriarchy, men, and other women"[7]. I use feminism as an intellectual framework for analysing how the lives of Iranian women involved in *Inter-universal Mysticism* have changed. Feminism is important here because feminism provides "an ideological basis for change on every level of human existence, from intimate behaviour to transforming patriarchy and its core values of dominance and control"[8]. Moreover, using feminist tools helps to reveal how, by choosing to participate in this movement, these women confront "the everyday realities of male privilege and the oppression of women"[9] in Iran. Although the women I interviewed do not wish to be called feminist and reject the term feminism, they share

[6] Hill et al., 2001, p. 71.
[7] Meyers, 2002, p. 2.
[8] Johnson, 2005, p. 102.
[9] Ibid.

reactions to and critiques of their world which can be understood in "feminist" terms. In other words, while these women distance themselves from feminism, it is nonetheless possible to find an illuminating feminist way of reading, respecting, commenting on and valuing their words, which draws out feminist implications in their stories. My feminist perspective enables a better understanding of these women and allows women to narrate their own lives and to become valued analysts and commentators on their lives.

One of the key features of this study is that it explores women's agency, choices and autonomy, as well as their negotiations and strategies for a better life. I focus on women's agency in its various manifestations and, to determine the meaning of concepts such as identity, autonomy, and agency, I have used feminist theories – in particular Kabeer (1999), Meyers (2002), Isaac (2002) and Eisenstein (2004) – in analysing the experiences of women on this spiritual path. The women's narratives from this feminist perspective revealed interrelated themes relevant to women's choice of this particular form of spirituality over other ways of resisting restrictions and shifting attitudes both at home, in relation to male relatives, and more widely in relation to patriarchal practices and institutions. My study shows how this spiritual movement allows women either to create greater autonomy in changing their lives, or to negotiate and manage their lives in ways which are more satisfying for them. Close reading of their narratives reveals why women participate in this movement in present day Iran when there are simultaneously many opportunities and many restrictions for women because of the political situation there.

The women's narratives provide glimpses into their lives as they represent their struggles, achievements, and certainties as well as uncertainties. Their stories reveal the layered and complex experiences of women living in Shia Muslim Iran at the present time. During the course of my study, participants commented on how they dealt with patriarchal institutions and a patriarchal regime; the power of these particular ideologies of the regime is currently enforced by the national political situation in which the Iranian regime uses violence and discrimination against women. I should note that there is a recognisable term for "patriarchy" in Farsi which is مردسالاری/*mard-salari*. In Iran, *mard-salari* is a social system in which men appropriate most, if not all, of the dominant social roles and keep women in subordinate positions. The main argument for using this term here is that patriarchy in Iran supports gender inequality and the subordination of women within and beyond the household. Using feminist ideas in the reading and analysis of women's

stories helped to show that as women proceed along this spiritual path, not only do they achieve self-determination and agency, but they also challenge patriarchy through the shifting of gendered power relations at home: for example, they treat their husbands differently; at the centre of these themes and ideas are strategies for developing the self and performing an authentic identity. Women's participation in the *Inter-universal Mysticism* movement has become a site for negotiating relationships between self, society, politics and the transcendent. It has created an opportunity for women to engage with critical reflections of themselves, and endeavour to widen their discussions to influence change in Iran's social and political systems. Ultimately, their narratives create much needed knowledge and context required to contemplate the interrelationships between women's choice, spirituality and feminism in Iran.

However, I have found that there is a gap between the understanding of feminism and of spirituality in Iran, a place with a considerable history of spirituality and mysticism (*erfan*). Most work on feminism and spirituality since the 1970s has been carried out by writers from western countries prompting the question: why have women in Iran not considered spirituality in their feminist movements? Or, if such arguments around feminism and spirituality do exist in Iran, why have we not heard them? Scholars who have investigated feminism in Iran have looked at it either as a rather secular tradition, or have focused only on women who very explicitly use Shia Islam; they have not thought about other aspects and experiences of religious life including the kind of spirituality associated with *Inter-universal Mysticism*. In other words, the studies that focus on feminism in Iran are mainly concerned with women's political and legal status, roles, or gender relations, based either on "Islam" or "secular human rights".

For example, Mir-Hosseini in *Stretching the limits: a feminist reading of the Sharia in post-Khomeini Iran* (1996), and Moghadam in *Islamic feminism: its discontents and its prospects* (2002), focus on Islamic feminists in Iran who, despite their respect for the Qu'ranic laws which define gender roles and the structure of the family and community, develop modern readings of the sharia and re-read the Qu'ran, Hadith, and Islamic history. Such feminists use their re-readings "to implement reforms with a view to facilitating women's access to the public sphere, thereby overcoming gender stratification"[10]. The focus of such studies is on elite women such as: Shahla Shirkat, the editor of *Zanan* magazine;

[10] Kian, 1995, p. 408.

Mahbubeh Ummi and Ma'sumeh Ibtikar, the editors of *Farzaneh*; Tayyibeh Iskandari, the new editor of *Zan-I Ruz* magazine; and Faezeh Hashemi, a journalist and former member of the Iranian parliament. These women all participated in a movement known as Islamic feminism, challenging the reduction in women's rights and the strict limits placed on women by the Islamic government.

By contrast, in their studies, Rostami Povey, in *Feminist contestations of institutional domains in Iran* (2001), and Ahmed-ghosh in *Dilemmas of Islamic and secular feminists and feminisms* (2008) analyse the complex relationship between gender, institutions, feminisms and democracy in Iran. They discuss secular feminists in Iran, for example: Mehrangiz Kar, a legal attorney; Shirin Ebadi, a former judge and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize; Nahid Musavi, a journalist; and Zhaleh Shaditalab, a sociology professor; "base their rationale for women's rights on a human rights discourse which enables and empowers the individual in a secular democracy to create a civil society"[11]. In their view, although religious reform is helpful and necessary, the recognition of its limitations is very important. Such feminists consider that "secular democracy is the prerequisite for demands for individual rights based on a system of fairness and justice, thus ensuring women a way to claim those rights"[12].

In their challenging of longstanding and conventional patriarchal frameworks that affect the lives of Iranian women, none of the feminist studies on Iran have considered the role of spirituality or spiritual movements. This study addresses this gap. It is also interesting that women who campaign for women's rights and interests in Iran have not considered engaging with women who are neither conventional Muslims nor strongly secular, but who explore other aspects of religion and spirituality. Women in my study identify themselves as believers in God, but they have different views of religion; some wish to be called religious but do not follow the official Islamic Shia and have their own way of being a good Muslim, while some think of spirituality as their religion and call themselves spiritual. Scholarship on women in Iran has not yet taken this approach or considered women's interests in spirituality over or with religion; this preference is central to my study as I examine the potential feminist implications of women's involvement in *Inter-universal Mysticism* and its emancipatory potential and feminist capabilities for women. My argument is that feminist spirituality is an expression of women's power to identify, explore, and assess their own spiritual

[11] Ahmed-Ghosh, 2008, p. 106.
[12] Ibid.

experiences to construct their sense of self and transform their lives. The reasons that I am able to develop this discussion are twofold. First, *Inter-universal Mysticism* as a movement has established an innovative relationship between religion and spirituality as both distinct and overlapping categories. Second, my close analysis of women's explanations of what spirituality on this path means to them indicates that there is an open and flexible relationship between religion and spirituality. They have recognised spirituality as something distinct in its own right but not necessarily or completely detached from their traditional religion of Shia Islam.

Given the lack of research on women and spirituality in Iran and the absence of any cohesive and empirically developed frameworks in the literature on Iranian women in this area, it was necessary for me to undertake this study at an exploratory level. Feminist-inspired scholarship on women and spirituality in western countries has provided a useful basis for my research and offered some valuable insights into the role of spirituality in women's lives. These studies were particularly useful in suggesting a wider range of contexts where women's choices, ideas and relations are questioned and shaped within a spiritual framework. In particular, they helped me to scrutinize spirituality in women's everyday lives. For example, in studies of African American women's spirituality, Mattis takes a similar approach to mine. Studying the subjective experiences and perspectives of African American women, she identifies the distinctions that these women make between religiosity and spirituality in their understanding of spirituality. Tisdell's work on women's spirituality and emancipatory adult education for social change is also relevant, as she examines the influence of spirituality in the lives of a group of women adult educators and its connection to emancipatory education. She investigates the particular religious traditions in which her respondents grew up and then assesses their renegotiations towards a more "adult" spirituality.

However, while these studies are useful, limitations remain, mainly because they study women and spirituality in other belief systems and cultures rather than women whose spiritual experiences and activities are embedded in Iranian Islamic culture. The spiritual experiences of women in my study are heavily influenced by the tradition of Shia Islam even while they remain critical of it. As studies such as *Islam in practice* by Loeffler (1988), *Women of Deh Koh* by Friedl (1989) and *Performing Islam* by Torab (2006) show, within popular Shia Muslim practice, the recitation of Qu'ranic verses or the repetition of prayer are meaningful and valuable for many Iranians. In fact, there is a rich texture of religious

culture over and above the official Islam in Iran. The belief in the importance of reciting Qu'ranic verses is one part of practicing traditional Shia Islam which has been developed over many years by ordinary people. Indeed, repeating prayers is an important part of daily life for most Iranians. For example, during my field work I spent time observing women on public transportation and in public places, including two pilgrimage centres that I visited to learn more about the lives of women in contemporary Iran. Interestingly, I witnessed many women on public transportation practicing some kind of spirituality, for example by whispering verses of the Qu'ran for various reasons. These included young girls on their way to their exams, women with economic problems such as an inability to pay bills, and many women who whispered verses for their own or family illnesses. I also saw men acting in this way; for example, I saw a man in Mashhad driving illegally and whispering a verse, hoping that the police would not catch and fine him. In shrines in Tehran and Mashhad, I noticed that the number of female visitors was considerably higher than male visitors. In hairdressers I heard women, especially young ones, referring to fortune tellers and those who write special verses of the Qu'ran for solving life problems: substantial amounts of money are paid for these services. It seems that looking for a spiritual, mystical or supernatural source of help for various problems has an important role in daily life for many Iranians. While such a conclusion is supported by my observations, my interviews and discussions with women involved in *Inter-universal Mysticism* led me to deeper insights to explain why spirituality and following such paths could have meaning in an Iranian woman's life.

My analytical approach to my research findings in this book is formed of two stages. The first stage is about reporting and contextualising the meanings which the women themselves attribute to their experience. In other words, I read women's narratives in a way that allows them to speak the meaning of their own experiences as far as is possible. The second stage is my own commentary and added reflections on those narratives and meanings. Importantly, women's narratives are used to ground my findings in women's own experiences. This study has a distinctly feminist focus as a consequence of my own interest in the quality of women's lives despite the fact that this movement, *Inter-universal Mysticism,* considers itself to be gender neutral, with human beings understood as beyond gender. I present and analyse the words of 55 women inside this movement who volunteered their ideas, opinions and stories within the framework of my enquiry.

SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTERS

In chapter one, "An introduction to *Inter-universal Mysticism*", I give a brief overview of *Inter-universal Mysticism* in order to introduce the reader to the history, aims and structure of the movement. Chapter two, "Setting the Scene: concepts, methods, and fieldwork", establishes a context for this book by explaining the processes by which my research developed from its original aims to its final analysis, detailing how the research was carried out and why the selected combination of methods (one-to-one semi-structured interviews, focus/discussion groups and participant observation) was chosen.

The following four chapters describe and examine the findings of my research. In chapter four, "Iranian women's choice of *Inter-universal Mysticism*: the personal and social motivations", I talk about women's accounts of *Inter-universal Mysticism* and their reasons for joining and following this movement. I identify five themes from women's stories of choosing and joining this movement: how women found out about the path; their religious conflicts and opposition to official Islam; patriarchy and social pressure; the spiritual healing of *Inter-universal Mysticism* called *faradarmani*; and women's desire for self-improvement. However, as I argue, the real experiences of the women I interviewed were various and demonstrate combinations of these themes: I separate the themes in order to facilitate investigation rather than because they operate independently.

Chapter five, "Engaging spirituality: women's perceptions and experiences", examines women's perceptions of being spiritual on this mystical path. Here, spirituality is theorised as a way of approaching life. By assessing women's relationships with their spirituality, I discuss how the spiritual and the material interact. The chapter identifies three different perspectives of spirituality among the women: those who think spirituality is separate from religion; those who believe in spirituality within religion; and those who think both religion and spirituality offer the same kind of resources. I argue that the beliefs, worldviews, and values of religious traditions and spirituality for women from all three perspectives provide the context in which they can generate "a sense of meaning, order, and place in the world"[13] that is central to their definition of spirituality.

[13] King et al., 2011, p. 173.

In chapter six, "Transforming lives: challenging everyday patriarchy through *Inter-universal Mysticism*", I analyse women's views of how involvement in *Inter-universal Mysticism* in Iran may change a woman's life. I argue that joining *Inter-universal Mysticism* has affected women in different ways and, for some of them, has changed their everyday lives. The agency, autonomy and self-confidence that women learn inside the movement give them new tools, resources and insights which they can use to change their lives or, if they are living the same life they had before joining this path, to find strategies for greater happiness.

Chapter seven, "The relationship between feminism and women's achievements in *Inter-universal Mysticism*", considers the extent to which women, in any way, connect their views and behaviours with feminism. I also attempt to show how women's achievements on this path–redefining themselves as confident women, able to challenge obstacles such as social structure or personal difficulties, and being able to search for *kamal*/fulfilment–can be read in a feminist way. My analysis show that these women distance themselves from what they understand as feminism for two main reasons, which I consider further by examining the influence of social and cultural assumptions and of *Inter-universal Mysticism* on women's insights. Finally, I argue that there are feminist implications in these women's own words which lead to the articulation of the relationship between feminism and these women's experiences on this spiritual path.

My conclusion suggests that women activists in Iran may want to think about an alternative strategy in their campaigning through considering the experience of women on the path of *Inter-universal Mysticism*. The application of feminist analysis to my interviews and the study of women's own understanding of themselves allow me to propose a particular way or relationship between spirituality and feminism in Iran. One possibility is that what I call feminist spirituality among women in *Inter-universal Mysticism* may open a dialogue between Islamic and secular feminists in Iran to find common ground which is as much a matter of practice as theory.

CHAPTER ONE

AN INTRODUCTION TO INTER-UNIVERSAL MYSTICISM

In order to make sense of the experiences of the women inside this path, I will introduce the reader to *Inter-universal Mysticism*. This short chapter presents a general introduction to the movement, describing how it has developed over the last thirty years, outlining its key tenets, and offering a snapshot of its important practices. You can read further about the significance of the *Inter-universal Mysticism* and how it differs from other spiritual movements in its place throughout the rest chapters.

The Development of Inter-universal Mysticism

In Iran, there is a rich tradition of mystical endeavour, thought and practice, some of which has echoes in *Inter-universal Mysticism*. To explore the mystical culture within which this movement has developed, I start with a brief history of *erfan*. *Erfan*, which in Farsi literally means "knowing", is similar to the Greco-Christian concept of *gnosis*. Taheri suggests that "the term is used to refer both to Islamic mysticism as well as the attainment of spiritual knowledge springing from direct insight"[1]. *Erfan* overlaps considerably with Sufism and is understood in two ways; as a part or element of Islamic religion which is called Sufism, and/or "as a process or way of life which is an attempt to express and seek a direct consciousness of the presence of God"[2]. The purpose of *erfan* is to achieve *kamal*, which in Farsi means the attainment of perfection, fulfilment or completeness. *Erfan* consists of "a variety of mystical paths that are designed to ascertain the nature of humanity and of God and to facilitate the experience of the presence of divine love and wisdom in the world"[3]. It is an aspect of Islamic belief and practice through which Iranians find a

[1] Taheri, 2008, p. 16.
[2] McGinn, 2002, p. xvi.
[3] The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1989, p. 355.

direct personal experience of God in which they seek the truth of divine love and knowledge. As such, *erfan* has developed a rich variety of forms, practices and institutions since its emergence in the tenth and eleventh centuries.[4]

Erfan was established in Iran by the eleventh century and was flourishing by the fourteenth century. In the following years, a number of Iranian thinkers and poets contributed to *erfan*. Of particular note are two *arefs*[5] who have profoundly affected Iranian life and culture and have enjoyed enduring popularity and influence: Jalal-al-din Rumi (1207–1273), known as Mowlana, and Khawjah Shams al-din Muhammad Hafez-e Shiraz (1325-1389), known as Hafez. Mowlana was the founder of the Mevlevi Sufi order, known to westerners as whirling dervishes, and the search for God passes to his followers through music or dance which they believe transcends thought. Hafez's influence on the lives of Iranians is maintained by *fale-e Hafez*/Hafez readings.[6] His collected poetry (*Divan-i Hafez*) can be found in the homes of most Farsi speakers who learn his poems by heart, and even non-literate Iranians use his writings as proverbs and sayings to this day. The tradition continued in Iran in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and, for many Iranians, *erfan* is an expression of personal religion. Some people practice both *erfan* and Islam simultaneously while for some *erfan* refers to a personal relation with God: a sense of self and a search for meaning and purpose in life outside of Islam.

Erfan Keyhani (*Halgheh*) or *Inter-universal Mysticism* (*Circle*) is based on the intuitions and revelations of Mohammad Ali Taheri and was founded by him thirty years ago.[7] Taheri was born in 1956 in Kermanshah, Iran and trained as a mechanical engineer before discovering *Inter-universal Mysticism.* He believes that the principles of his understandings are compatible with Iranian mysticism or, rather, that its insights are deeply embedded in the Iranian mystical tradition of Sufism, Persian poetry and Abrahamic or monotheistic faiths. In an interview on 14 September 2010, Taheri said that his mysticism is based on discoveries

[4] For a general schema of different modes of *erfan* and its development see Trimingham, 1998.

[5] The precise word for 'master in *erfan*' or an *erfan* master. Also sometimes called Sufi, Dervish or Pir.

[6] 'For centuries, it has been a Persian tradition to open Hafez when confronted with a difficult decision or choice. When used in divination, it is widely believed that Hafez's poetry will reveal the answer to your destiny' (Samipersia, 2007, n.p).

[7] Taheri has never mentioned an exact date or year of founding for this path but has simply said it is thirty years old.