



The Eternal Feminine in Sufism: readings of Ibn ‘Arabī and Emir Abd el- Kader

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While Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240) is known as the “greatest master” (al-shaykh al-akbar) of the spirituality and esotericism of Islam, the Emir Abd el-Kader (‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī, d. 1883) is better known for his uprising against the French oc-

cupation, between 1832 and 1847. Yet, he was brought up in a Sufi environment and always declared that his spiritual vocation came before all else. As testified by many episodes of his life and numerous visions, he was a disciple of Ibn ‘Arabī, across

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the centuries. As we shall see, both are “Muḥammadan heirs” in the sense that all their formulations with respect to the Feminine and woman emanate from what is called “Muḥammadan Presence” in Sufism.

The Prophet Muḥammad loved the Feminine. His famous saying bears witness to this: “I have been made to love three things from your world: women, perfume, and prayer which is my supreme pleasure.” Women are thus linked with what is most subtle and spiritual. The grammatical shift used in Arabic clearly indicates that this love for women has a divine, metaphysical source; it therefore means: “God has made me love, from your world....” Ibn ‘Arabī explains that this love that the Prophet felt for women was due to the fact that they are the manifestation of God’s most actualized beauty on earth. Since the Divine Essence is utterly inaccessible and independent from the worlds, the contemplation of God requires spiritual supports, and woman is said to be the most perfect “locus of manifestation” (*mazhar*) of God.¹ Herein lies the justification for the usage of the formula ‘The Eternal feminine’ by the very pen of Ibn ‘Arabī: “By ‘women’ I mean the Femininity diffused into the world: it is manifested more in women, which is why they have been made dear to him they have been made dear to [that is, the Prophet].”²

A clarification must be made here about Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysical

doctrine which was followed in particular by Abd el-Kader. Multiplicity unfolds gradually starting from divine Unity through an uninterrupted succession of divine self-disclosures (*tajalliyyāt*). These take on innumerable forms which never repeat themselves. All things or beings are therefore a “locus of self-disclosure”, a receptacle that receives this radiation in accordance with its predispositions. Divine Beauty is manifested in the sensory world, and the Prophet has said: “I saw God in the form of a beardless youth.” This self-disclosing possibility is contained in the following *ḥadīth qudsī*³ : “I am according to My servant’s opinion of Me.” Woman being the actualization of this self-disclosure, it is only logical that, for the “Muḥammadan heir” or the gnostic, love of woman is a Sunna, a prophetic model to be followed: “Whoever values women by their true worth and knows their intimate secret,” writes Ibn ‘Arabī, “does not disdain to love them, unlike the ascetics. Rather, such love is an integral part of the gnostic’s perfection, for it is a prophetic heritage and a love from a divine source.”⁴

The pre-excellence of the Feminine

What are then, broadly speaking, some of the elements and teachings of the two shaykhs on the “Eternal feminine”? They are based on a very audacious metaphysics of sex. All that is created is the fruit of the

union of the two poles: “activity” (*fi’l*, *fā’iliyya*) and “receptivity” (*infi’āl*, *qābiliyya*), impregnating (*nākih*) and impregnated (*mankūh*), masculine and feminine principle, man and woman, etc. Creation is therefore reproduced by an infinite procession of cosmic marriages: the First Intellect impregnates the Universal Soul; the *Qalam*, that is the divine pen, fertilizes the Guarded Tablet (*al-Lawḥ al-maḥfūz*) wherein is engraved all that is dictated to it⁵; the sky casts onto earth the command revealed by God⁶; Adam impregnates Eve; the spirit (*rūḥ*) impregnates the soul (*nafs*)⁷; night and day interpenetrate, as the Qur’an affirms in many places.⁸ The motion of the spheres is thus identical to the movement made during coitus.⁹ “Herein lies a classical explanation particular to the ancient and medieval worldview even though before Ibn ‘Arabī it was not always formulated in terms of sexual activity. It finds its equivalence with them in Qur’anic terms.”¹⁰

It follows that the active, masculine principle can only be realized if it is welcomed by the receptive, feminine principle. The Pen, for example, loses its essential identity, which is writing, if it does not find support (the Guarded Tablet) to express and accomplish this identity, i.e., passing from potentiality to action.¹¹ Thus, it is man who needs woman, not vice versa. This is true first of all on the ontological level.

In fact, without woman’s function of “receptivity” (*infi’āl*, *qābiliyya*), man’s “activity” (*fi’l*) would remain “pure nothingness” (*‘adam mutlaq*).¹² Starting from the ḥadīth quoted earlier, “I have been made to love three things from your world: women, perfume, and prayer...”, Ibn ‘Arabī tells us that “The Prophet has mentioned first women because

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they are the locus of receptivity, just as primordial nature (*al-tabī’a*) precedes all that is engendered from it. For primordial nature is none other than the “Breath of the Compassionate” (*nafas al-Raḥmān*), because it is in Him that the forms of the world are unfolded, from the highest to the lowest ones.”¹³

Emir Abd el-Kader gives an audacious pre-excellence to the Feminine, gifted as it is with receptivity: “Woman as such is the locus of manifestation (*maẓhar*) of the degree of receptivity, which is none other than the degree of possibilities. Yet, this degree possesses an eminent and excellent position. In

fact, were it not for femininity, that is, the degree of receptivity of the active Agent which is that of Divinity and of the divine Names, these Names would have not been actualized, thereby remaining unknown.”¹⁴ One must remember here that, according to the doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabī and therefore of his disciple Abd el-Kader, the divine Names are intermediary instances between the pure divine Essence and creation; therefore it is they who manage the world. The Divine, not in its Essence but in its manifestation, is somehow in need of the Feminine in order to reveal itself.

Given the lack of separation in Islam between the metaphysical and physical levels the situation of man’s need towards woman is equally embodied on the physical plane: in human sexuality, it is man, the “active” partner (*nākih*) who is the seeker (*tālib*), and therefore the indigent or lacking (*iftiqār*); whereas woman is sought (*matlūba*), desired: since “[masculine] desire is imperious” she is superior to man, for she is stronger.¹⁵ Woman therefore has a greater capacity to contain her desires and to hide her love. Ibn ‘Arabī explains the foolhardiness of masculine desire for woman as due to the fact that Eve emerged from Adam, and he has ever since experienced an immense nostalgia caused by this void.¹⁶

Let us go further: woman is closer to God than man, more “divine”, for like God she is the seat of

engendering (*al-takwīn*), the indispensable place where human being is formed.¹⁷ The Engenderer (*al-Mukawwin*) is not found in the canonical list of divine Names, but it is evidently one of the attributes of God who is He who engenders things, bringing them into existence. After God, on the level of creation, it is woman who stands at the origin of life.

The secret of feminine strength

This secret is mentioned both by Ibn ‘Arabī and Abd el-Kader based on the surprising Qur’anic verse 66:4. Its revelation is curiously provoked by “alcove secrets” in one of the conflict episodes, tinged with jealousy, among the wives of the Prophet and himself. The verse involves two of his wives, ‘Āisha and Ḥafsa, who had joined against him. The verse commands: “If the two of you repent to Allah, for your hearts have swerved...”. It is the rest of the verse and more generally human logic that our two Sufis investigate: “...but if you back each other against him, then [know that] Allah is indeed his guardian, and Gabriel, the righteous among the faithful, and, thereafter, the angels are his supporters.” Why does God convoke Himself and His supreme angels and the righteous servants to provide their support against two women?

The exegetes of the *Qur’an* have generally avoided the interpretation of this verse. As for Ibn ‘Arabī,

he brings elements of explication which remain very allusive. After having discussed it with a gnostic friend, he asks God to make known to him the secret of this verse.¹⁸ He then realizes that these two women possessed a science and a capacity for action which gave them a strength comparable to that held inadvertently by prophet Loth when he invoked God's succor against his people.¹⁹ Later in the *Futūḥāt*, the Andalusian master underlines with regards to this verse that the angels who were created from breaths (*nafas*, pl. *anfās*) of women are the most powerful of all.²⁰ The key resides in another passage which is centered on the notion of passivity/ receptivity (*infi'āl*). In brief, he writes that all those who are called scholars (*'ālim*) have first been "known" (*ma'lūm*) and have had to be receptive to knowledge before receiving it. And just as things pre-exist in the divine knowledge and later are engendered in accordance with what God knows about them, the masculine follows the feminine because the latter reveals to him his first femininity or receptivity. The receptivity of the feminine type is thus more encompassing, more complete (*jāmi'*).²¹

Abd el-Kader devotes two "stops" (*mawqif*) to the commentary of this verse:

- In *mawqif* 127, he affirms before expanding with his own experience the spiritual unveiling (*kashf*) he had received from Ibn 'Arabī, but which had not been really unveiled

by him. Then he develops his own exegesis of verse 66:4. The two women - 'Āisha and Ḥafsa - "are the perfect manifestations of active reality, due to their human perfection: in effect, they join in themselves the two presences of the active (*fi'l*) and the receptive (*infi'āl*)." He continues by saying that woman as the seat of procreation is closer to God, the Engenderer (*al-Mukawwin*).²²

- In *mawqif* 249, Abd el-Kader reiterates his remark: Ibn 'Arabī did not unveil the secret of feminine strength. There he states, in slightly different terms from what he writes in the preceding *mawqif*, that "perfection lies in women - as attested to by the Messenger of God - and cannot be the privilege of men. The Real is too elevated to be qualified by receptivity (*infi'āl*) [...] As for Gabriel and the angels, they do not have this synthetic, totalizing capacity which belongs only to humankind. They cannot realize all the Names [...]; therefore they can neither manifest nor realize fully the degree of receptivity which belongs to women in their own right. It is this secret that explains the incredible strength of these two ladies, as mentioned in the Qur'anic verse."²³

Let us attempt to summarize the position of these two shaykhs. The receptivity proper to the Feminine is first on the ontological and cosmological plane. The active can only produce its effect by starting from this receptivity and solely in its presence; otherwise it re-

mains in the order of potentialities (*mumkināt*), and can be pure nothingness permanently. The secret of feminine strength seems to reside in the conjunction of the active and receptive presences, at least when expressed in spiritually accomplished women like ‘Āisha and Ḥafsa. Having realized fullness in themselves, such women hold pre-excellence over man, who has forgotten his femininity, his original receptivity. In his commentary of the Divine Name *al-Qawwī* (“the Strong”), Ibn ‘Arabī therefore concludes that “in the created world there is none more powerful than woman, by virtue of a secret which is accessible only to him who knows in what has the world been engendered and through what movement has God engendered it.”²⁴

Ibn ‘Arabī reaches this audacious observation: he mentions woman’s nobility (*sharaf*) by comparing the most classical position of the sexual act (when the man is above the woman) to the prostrations (*sujūd*) of the human being before God during the Muslim ritual prayer: did not the Prophet say that it is in this stage of the prayers, while the servant’s is facing the earth, that he is closest to God? During the sexual act, man is therefore in prostration over woman ...²⁵ Here is Abd el-Kader, the valiant Arab knight who rose against the French army for seventeen years, confessing in his verses no doubt regarding his wife Khayra:

I submit to her out of humility – she is even more arrogant,

She abandons me, I see it, in the hardest way.²⁶

For a renewed reading of *Qur’an*, 4:1

Let us, however, not go from the above to secular, modern feminism. For the Prophet as for these shaykhs, it is a question of realizing in us the “perfect” or “fully accomplished” human being (*al-insān al-kāmil*), who unifies in himself / herself the two masculine and feminine poles. As mentioned by Ibn ‘Arabī in numerous instances, our sexual condition, male or female, is but adventitious, transient, and secondary. Once reintegrated to Unity (*tawḥīd*), the human being transcends these polarities which are as many aspects of the duality characterizing the embodiment.

The *Qur’an* states in a very clear manner the non-sexual origin of the human soul into which we are called to resorb: “O humankind! Be wary of your Lord who created you from a single soul (*nafs*), and created its mate (*zawj*) from it...”²⁷ Let us note first that this verse opens chapter The Women (*al-nisā’*), which cannot be considered as a coincidence. Moreover, the conventional, male chauvinistic interpretation (and translation) of this verse contradicts the very letter of the Qur’anic text. In fact, the first term, although feminine in gender (*nafs*) is most often

understood to refer to Adam, and the second, masculine in gender, as alluding to Eve! The conformist exegesis of the *Qur'an* is in fact marked by the Judeo-Christian reading of the primordial couple, as attested by the legend of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib.²⁸ Numerous thinkers and modern Muslim feminists – men and women – have not missed pointing out this misappropriation of meaning, and the verse is about to be re-read in accordance with its grammatical structure.

The awakened person, the gnostic, is therefore he who recognizes in himself the opposite sex. The transcending of oppositions, which he then realizes and which is a preliminary to all initiatic rise towards Unity, is therefore visible in the eyes of the other. It seems to characterize well Abd el-Kader, according to the testimonies of his contemporaries:

“A duality stems indeed from the majority of portraits of him [Abd el-Kader] that have been painted: “A shy *hajji* with calm eyes, the thoughtful emir, ferocious and gentle” in *Les Châtiments* by the pen of Victor Hugo; “strength covered by grace” by Eugène de Civry; “a beautiful ideal of morals and physical grandeur” in the biography by Churchill, who saw in him the result of a “perfect conjoining of feminine and masculine qualities.”²⁹

How then, can one not end with these verses by the Moroccan shaykh Muḥammad al-Harrāq (d. 1845), in which Layla denotes, as

usually with Sufi poets, the divine Essence, both that which is more subtle and more ineffable?

Seekest though Layla when she is in thee manifest?

Thou holdest her for another, and yet she is none but thee!³⁰

These verses which address a priori man, Arab man, enjoin him to recognize the divine Feminine in him, that is, his femininity.

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NOTES

- 1 Ibn 'Arabî, *Fusūs al-ḥikam*, ed. 'Afîfî, Beirut, 1980, I, 217.
- 2 Ibn 'Arabî, *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, Dar Sadr, Beirut, n.d., III, 256.
- 3 Prophetic tradition in which God speaks using the first person
- 4 Ibn 'Arabî, *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, op. cit., II, 190.
- 5 Ibid., III, 60-65 in particular.
- 6 Ibid., I, 131, 139, 142.
- 7 Ibid., III, 99.
- 8 Ibid., II, 170, 445.
- 9 Ibid., I, 526, 583.
- 10 Mokdad Mensia Arfa, "Ibn 'Arabî et sa métaphysique du sexe", *Les Cahiers de Tunisie*, no. 168, 1st quarter 1995, p. 19.
- 11 Shirine Dakouri, "La femme selon Abd el-Kader al-Hassanî", *Abd el-Kader – Un spirituel dans la modernité*, directed by Éric Geoffroy, Albouraq, 2010, p. 268.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 *Fusūs al-ḥikam*, op. cit., I, 219.
- 14 Abd El-Kader, *Kitāb al-Mawāqif*, ed. 'Abd al-Bāqī Miftāḥ, Alger, 2005, II, 3.
- 15 Ibn 'Arabî, *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, op. cit., II, 466.
- 16 Ibid., I, 136.
- 17 Abd El-Kader, *Kitāb al-Mawāqif*, op. cit., I, 330.
- 18 Abd el-Kader mentions this episode in his *Mawāqif*, op. cit., I, 329.
- 19 Ibn 'Arabî, *Futūḥāt*, op. cit., I, 180. See *Qur'an*, 11:80.
- 20 *Futūḥāt*, op. cit., II, 466.
- 21 Ibid., IV, 84.
- 22 Abd El-Kader, *Kitāb al-Mawāqif*, op. cit., I, 329-330.
- 23 Ibid., II, 3-4.
- 24 *Futūḥāt*, op. cit., II, 466.
- 25 Ibid., III, 256.
- 26 Jazâ'irî 'Abd al Qādir [Abd el-Kader], *Dīwān*, critical edition by Mamdūh Ḥaqqī, Beirut, 1964, p. 59.
- 27 *Qur'an* 4:1.
- 28 See on the question Asma Lamrabet, *Le Coran et les femmes – Une lecture de libération*, Tawhid, Lyon, 2007, p. 26-27.
- 29 Ahmed Bouyerdene, Abd el-Kader – *L'harmonie des contraires*, Paris, Seuil, 2008, p. 220. Emphasis added.
- 30 Excerpt from his *Dīwān*, or collection of poetry.