

Islamic Feminisms

Ibn 'Arabī and Mystical Disruptions of Gender: Theoretical Explorations in Islamic Feminism

Once upon a time in the twelfth century there was a spiritually precocious young man called Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn al-'Arabī al-Ḥaṭīmī al-Ṭa'ī, born in the sun-kissed Andalusian city of Murcia, in southern Spain. Word had got out that Ibn 'Arabī, despite his youth, had experienced a number of extraordinary mystical visions of God. Curious and intrigued by the possible insights the boy might have on the nature of knowledge, the wise leading philosopher of the day Ibn Rushd summoned him to a meeting. Surprised that the lad was still beardless, Ibn Rushd embraced him saying “yes.” To his delight, the young boy responded with a clear affirmation “Yes.” Just as Ibn Rushd's face lit up with joy at this confirmation of his life work, the lad added with equal resoluteness “No.”

Ibn Rushd was perplexed and wanted clarity on the matter. He asked “What have you arrived at through unveiling and divine inspiration? Is it the same knowledge that rational consideration leads us to?” The young Ibn 'Arabī responded evenly “Yes and no. Between the ‘yes’ and the ‘no,’ spirits take flight from their matter and necks are detached from their bodies.” Understanding this vivid allusion, Ibn Rushd turned pale and shuddered, reciting the ritual invocation “There is no power and no strength but in God.”¹

The evocative encounter between the erudite aging philosopher Ibn Rushd, known in the West as Averroes, and the young Sufi Ibn 'Arabī raises some critical questions on the nature of knowledge and epistemology within Islam. How does one approach an understanding of ultimate reality? Do different methods of knowing yield the same knowledge? Are the varying forms of knowing equivalent? In this story, the iconic premodern

¹ This is my creative rendition of a story related by Ibn 'Arabī in *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (1911, 1:153). Ibn 'Arabī was given the title “Muḥyī al-Dīn,” translated as the “Reviver of Religion,” to mark his profound and far-reaching impact on Muslim spirituality and thought.

scholars Ibn Rushd and Ibn ‘Arabī embody two paths of knowledge within the Muslim tradition, those of philosophy and mysticism respectively. More especially, the story alludes enticingly to the deep mystery at the heart of reality—a mystery that includes God and the human being, a mystery that cannot be known or contained through binary, rational, and mutually exclusive categories. The story illuminates the limits of human capacities to fully apprehend the nature of reality. Ibn ‘Arabī suggests that the spaces of knowledge existing between the rational categories of “yes” and “no”—in-between spaces encountered through mystical experience and expressed through dialectical language—constitute spaces of flight, movement, and productive disruption to dominant epistemologies.

In this article, I explore the contours of a Sufi epistemology as developed by Ibn ‘Arabī, premised on the view that knowledge of God, reality, and humanity is fluid. In conversation with Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas, I theorize gender, drawing on Islamic mysticism.² As such, I foreground ideas that might provide material for theoretical developments for and with other Islamic feminists—bringing to the table Sufi resources for rethinking religious anthropology broadly and gender more specifically.³ A number of Islamic feminists have produced innovative, critical, and creative analytical and theological reflections within the study of Islam. Specifically, they have engaged the Quran and its exegetical literature (*tafsir*), hadith, history, and the law in significant ways. However, the area of Sufism remains relatively understudied within the mainstream of emerging discussions of Islam and gender justice.⁴

The resources offered by Sufism in general, and Ibn ‘Arabī’s work in particular, are available to Islamic feminists to deepen and enrich an innovative

² For this article, I draw on an argument first made in my book *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy* (Shaikh 2012) and develop it to more explicitly theorize gender drawing on Islamic mysticism and the works of Ibn ‘Arabī in particular.

³ A number of Muslim scholars have done pioneering and transformative gendered analyses and constructive theological reflections within Islam. For deep engagements with questions of Muslim religious anthropologies, gender, and Islamic feminism, see among others the works of Fatima Mernissi (1991), Leila Ahmed (1992), Amina Wadud (1999, 2006), Oaima Abou Bakr (2003), Kecia Ali (2006), Etin Anwar (2006), Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2006), Asma Barlas (2008), Zainah Anwar (2009), Margot Badran (2009), Raja Rhouni (2010), Julianne Hammer (2012), Ayesha Chaudhry (2013), Fatima Seedat (2013a, 2013b), Ayesha Hidayatullah (2014), Aisha Geissinger (2015), Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Mulki Al-Sharmani, and Jana Rumminger (2015), Asma Lamrabet (2016), and Sophia Rose Arjana (2017).

⁴ Some of the important scholarly work on gender and Sufism that is part of this fledgling archive has been authored by Annemarie Schimmel (1977, 1997), Valerie Hoffman-Ladd (1992), Sachiko Murata (1992), Shemmam Burney Abbas (2002), Sa’diyya Shaikh (2003, 2012, 2013, 2015), Laury Silvers (2006, 2007), Bianca Smith and Mark Woodward (2014), and Rkia Cornell (2019). Cornell has also translated and provided a critical introduction to an important eleventh-century manuscript on Sufi women by biographer Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān Al-Sulamī (1999).

conversation with tradition as we dialogically reimagine emancipatory and ever-more inclusive ways of being Muslim and being human.⁵ In a scholarly tradition of religiously engaged feminists retrieving nourishing but historically contested or marginalized ideas from their respective traditions, I bring Ibn ‘Arabī’s contributions into a contemporary feminist conversation on gender.⁶ I explore, more particularly, spaces of in-betweenness generated through mystical dialectics in Sufi discourse and argue that these present a productively destabilizing epistemology that can expand debates on the meanings and signification of gender. I reflect on the ways in which Ibn ‘Arabī and Sufi resources facilitate forms of engagement that unsettle reified gender hierarchies. Finally, I reflect briefly, via the theoretical insights gleaned from Islamic mysticism, on the approach of three influential contemporary Western feminist theorists and consider how we might converse when engaging a more inclusive historical archive for troubling gender.

This article is divided into three parts. First, it situates Ibn ‘Arabī’s contribution to Islamic mysticism and provides a brief review of the idea of mystery within scholarship on mysticism. Second, the most substantive part of the article explores core notions of the human being and gender within Ibn ‘Arabī’s cosmology and presents a set of theoretical reflections on gender and some implications for contemporary gender debates. Finally, it reads prevailing feminist theories on gender through the lens of Sufism and brings them into conversation with Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas.

Locations: Ibn ‘Arabī, mysticism, and mystery

Ibn ‘Arabī, born in Murcia in 1165 CE during Muslim political rule over Andalusia, was well educated in a vibrant, cosmopolitan intellectual milieu. A prolific author, his magnum opus, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan openings), addresses cosmology, scripture, law, and ethics—and woven throughout are Ibn ‘Arabī’s personal mystical experiences. Eliciting commentary by generations of scholars, this encyclopedic compendium has been hailed as

⁵ Sufism, like other parts of Muslim tradition, has a mixed and ambivalent history of both androcentrism and sexism, on the one hand, as well as gender-egalitarian, inclusive, and emancipatory conceptions of human nature, on the other. I am not ignoring or flattening this tension but rather focusing on some foundational ideas in Sufism that can be engaged with creatively and dialogically for the constructive project of contemporary Islamic feminist theorizing. For a more detailed analytical and historical mapping of the gendered tensions in Sufism, see Shaikh (2012, 1–60).

⁶ For a pioneering work of nuanced historical retrieval of the Prophet Muḥammad’s life and gender relations, see Mernissi (1991). In reading for gender in Buddhist histories, Rita Gross (1993) argues that sensitive feminist analyses can circumvent anachronistic contemporary projections onto religious histories while facilitating the retrieval of visionary and liberatory gender models.

one of the most expansive and incisive books in Muslim intellectual and spiritual history (Nasr 1976, 98). In his powerful propheticology, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (Bezels of wisdom), Ibn ‘Arabī’s culminating chapter on the Prophet Muḥammad, the single most important figure in the Muslim tradition, addresses an ontological understanding of God and humanity through a sustained discussion on gender and male-female relationships. This chapter reflects on some of the deepest existential dimensions of monotheism.

Heralded as a sophisticated theoretician of Sufi metaphysics and a distinguished practical master in his time, Ibn ‘Arabī had an impact on both popular and intellectual Sufi discourses that has been amply documented (Ahmed 2016, 31). Contemporary scholar of Sufism Alexander Knysh (1999, 1) points to this contested but powerful legacy, noting that from the thirteenth century onward, virtually every important Muslim scholar appears to have been compelled to comment on Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas. For the purposes of this article, I turn to aspects of his mystical theology as it relates to human nature and relationships.

Within Islamic mysticism, God and the human being constitute an enigmatic mystery at the heart of the Muslim tradition—and both stubbornly elude static and singular modes of knowing. Grappling with the limits of language to capture the mystery of the Divine-human relationship, Sufis, like other mystics, have used linguistic devices to escape reification and closure. While contemplation of the human being’s unfathomable nature has been central in Sufi literature, the idea of gender as intrinsic to the mystery of the human condition has received less sustained attention. It is precisely this ultimately unknowable nature of gender, tied as it is to human beings, that requires more attention. Here I illustrate that Ibn ‘Arabī points us to the recognition that gender cannot be reified—that it must evade conclusive definition, that it will resist firm categorizations, that it will demand a recognition of its own irreducibility—primarily because it is an intrinsic part of the ultimate mystery of the human condition. Here it is necessary to have some sense of what we mean when discussing notions of mystery within Ibn ‘Arabī’s framework.

In this regard, when examining Ibn ‘Arabī’s language and works, the scholarship of Michael Sells (1994) is instructive. Drawing on mystical works that range from the early Greeks to premodern Christians and Muslims (including Ibn ‘Arabī), Sells suggests that mystery is “neither a set of abstruse doctrines to be taken on faith nor a secret prize for the initiated. Mystery is the referential openness to the depths of the particular tradition” (1994, 8). Given that at the center of all traditions are concepts of self and ideas of subjectivity, mysticism demands a “referential openness” to understandings of the human condition, thus prompting a greater openness and dynamism to our understandings of gender.

Sells observes, “a referential openness is fleeting . . . as soon as one thinks one has it, one had lost it” (1994, 8). Given the dynamic, shifting, and elusive nature of such insights, mystics use apophatic language, the “yes” and the “no,” as an epistemological mode. Apophasis, Sells elaborates, “is a discourse in which any single proposition is acknowledged as falsifying, as reifying. It is a discourse of double propositions, in which meaning is generated through the tension between saying and unsaying” (1994, 12). It is precisely this tension that is lucidly captured in Ibn ‘Arabī’s use of “yes and no” in the introductory anecdote.

Catherine Keller, scholar of Christian mysticism, adds that apophatic language seeks to expose “theological idols” by revealing the partial and limited capacity of finite representations to reflect infinity (2008, 912). A simple yet profound epistemological value gained from apophasis is the recognition of our limited capacity to understand God, to understand human nature, and to understand gender. It urges a deeper responsiveness to the nuanced, varied, and dynamic nature of the human condition in its multiplicity as well as in its connectedness. It may thus facilitate an appreciation of the full array of human diversities without relinquishing potentially shared and universal dimensions of human experience. Such an approach enables one to be more keenly attentive to an epistemology holding both “yes” and “no” and the spaces of in-betweenness integral to the human condition.

Through exploring Ibn ‘Arabī’s approach, I propose that an apophatic mode enables the spaciousness needed for multiple and shifting meanings of gender and human nature to unfold—suggestive and tentative notions that escape the propensity to fix and stabilize singular conceptions. Simultaneously, by maintaining both the “yes” and the “no,” this approach also resists the dissolution of a shared humanity and an archetypal ideal necessary for human becoming. Instead, the apophatic mode allows us to recognize our shared existential possibilities as human beings, without claiming complete maps and fully traversed territories. We may therefore welcome our unknowing as epistemologically crucial. This, I argue, encourages a hermeneutics of generosity and capaciousness, and orients the readers (if they are so inclined) toward the undervalued but vivifying virtue of epistemological humility. Ibn ‘Arabī’s apophatic language, which holds the tension and possibilities between the “yes” and the “no,” is thus particularly productive when approaching issues of gender and sexuality within Islam.

Humanity in Sufi cosmology

To identify relevant assumptions on human nature and gender within Ibn ‘Arabī’s broader framework, it is necessary to understand a key term used

to describe his metaphysics, namely the “Oneness of Being” (*wahdat al-wujūd*).⁷ From this perspective, all existence emerges from and reveals a singular and unitary ground of being. As such, all the multiplicity of creation comes from the One. The diverse forms of created beings amid nature, human beings, and the entire cosmos are each and all manifestations of the One. In bridging the gap between the singular source and its manifold creative expressions, Sufis, including Ibn ‘Arabī, have developed an elaborate theology of divine attributes, names, or qualities that varyingly manifest in all creation (Shaikh 2012, 75–81). Such a metaphysics directs one’s attention to the deep intimacy and interconnectedness of all creation. In addition, the unveiling of the One through the theater of manifestation, which collectively displays and reflects divine attributes, is characterized by the vibrant theological interplay of transcendence (*tanzīh*) and immanence (*tashbīh*). While all manifest the unitary One, the One always transcends the immanence of its forms, hence retaining mystery (Shaikh 2012, 68–71).

Within this metaphysical framework, humanity occupies a unique role in the universe. While God’s attributes are manifest in partial ways in all creation, none other than the human being has the capacity for comprehensive manifestation of all the divine attributes. A favored Sufi tradition is the *ḥadīth al-Qudsī*, where God says, “The heavens and earth do not contain Me, but the heart of My faithful servant contains Me.” From this perspective, all rituals and religious practices are seen as attempts to polish the heart, which is the spiritual center and the abode of God. According to the Sufis, the polishing of the human heart removes veils of distraction and heedlessness, enabling a clearer reflection and illumination of the divine qualities that collectively reside within it.

Ibn ‘Arabī presents one of the most sophisticated developments of Sufi ideas on the relationship between God and humanity, culminating in the concept of an ideal human subject, *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, the “complete human” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1946, 48–58). In this cosmology, the complete human being (*al-Insān al-Kāmil*) constitutes the living embodiment of a harmonious and comprehensive balance of the divine names or attributes. The human being, due to the unique potential to integrate and synthesize all the divine names found more disparately and diffusely within other creations, is described as the microcosm of existence, or the “small universe” (*al-‘ālam al-ṣaghīr*). By virtue of this unifying and cohering capacity, the human being

⁷ While Ibn ‘Arabī himself did not use this term, it became associated with his work by later Sufis. For a luminous discussion of the idea of the unity of being in Ibn ‘Arabī’s work, see Hakim (2004).

renders the cosmos conscious, thus bringing the entire chain of existence into completion. Drawing on and expanding Ibn ‘Arabī’s central ideas, adherents of his school of thought developed nuanced notions of the human heart as constituting a *barzakh*—that is, a link, bridge, or isthmus (Murata 1992, 310). Signifying spaces of in-betweenness, the *barzakh* is that which “stands between and separates two other things yet combines the attributes of both” (Chittick 1989, 14) and so contributes to our understanding of how multiplicity is comprehensively contained in the One.

The notion of “Oneness of Being” is not simply a neat conceptual or theoretical postulate—the Arabic term for “being” is *wujud*, which also means “finding.” For Ibn ‘Arabī and many Sufis, it suggests the existential imperative to embark on a journey of discovery, since each human being has a distinct manner of finding, revealing, and manifesting this Oneness. Ibn ‘Arabī’s view that the divine self-disclosure never repeats itself is a key to understanding human diversity as well as the dynamic nature of the God-human relationship.⁸ Drawing on Ibn ‘Arabī’s paradigm, one may infer a number of implications for conceptualizing subjectivity: each person is at once a unique site of divine self-disclosure and simultaneously shares with every other person the potential to comprehensively embody a balance of all divine attributes. Each individual manifests the divine names in relation to the very specific contours, predispositions, configurations, locations, cultivation, and possibilities of their particular person and nature. From this perspective, then, each individual is a discrete manifestation of the One, with a distinctive path to their own refinement of divine attributes. Yet it is only within and through this particularity that each human being treads the path toward completion—the path to embodying the universal human archetypal state of *al-Insān al-Kāmil*. I maintain that Ibn ‘Arabī is reflecting on both the shared existential imperative and the distinctiveness of each person’s beliefs when he invokes the views of his Sufi predecessor Junayd (d. 910), who stated that the water takes on the color of its [glass] cup (Ibn ‘Arabī 1946, 226). The “water” contained in every cup is from the same ontological source yet is filtered through the particularity and distinct existential hue of each human being. This, I suggest in relation to human subjectivity, presents us with a keen balance of particularity and universality, individuality and collectivity, separation and union—and ultimately the relationship of the One with the many. Human beings hold the delicate seamless balance between distinctive individuality and unhindered equal access to a universal inclusive path of being and becoming,

⁸ For discussion of Qur’anic verse “Everyday God is upon some [new] task” (Q55:29), see Chittick (1989, 180).

where each human embodiment manifests qualities of the all-embracing Divine.

This textured view of human nature within Sufi theology offers resources to understand the tremendous diversity of human beings, including varieties in gender and sexual orientation, as all part of divine manifestation. Given that the multiple divine names interweave and combine in so many possible combinations to manifest within humanity, this allows us to theorize beyond simplistic binary formulations of gender and sexuality. Human beings might be men, women, intersex, transgender, asexual, bisexual, homosexual, and heterosexual. All of these identities, as constructed in society, reveal various combinations of divine attributes manifesting in the world. This then honors the particularities and specificities of the human condition. Yet each person is called upon to cultivate these attributes within themselves in order to more sharply and luminously manifest the One: the balance between the particularity of human beings and the universal goals of spiritual life is carefully maintained. Moreover, it is imperative to remember that for Ibn 'Arabī sexuality is intrinsic to spirituality and transformation, and thus embedded in an ethical register of nourishing relationality. This is not a cavalier, relativist, anything-goes approach to sexuality but one premised on the highest values of respect and care, manifesting the balance of divine qualities.

In addition, the idea found in Sufism that divine self-disclosure is ongoing and never repeats itself also suggests that all forms of human subjectivity—and thus conceptions of gender and sexuality—are provisional. If God's relationship to creation is never the same from one moment to the next, the spiritually healthy human being is the dynamic site of continual spiritual receptivity to the changing face of the One. From this vantage point, we engage notions of God as dynamism and difference, and the divine-human relationship is an intimate process characterized by perpetual transformation. This is indeed a theology of dynamism that demands an epistemology on the move—an openness to transforming and transformative knowledge. It offers a vital, living ontology that is premised on open and itinerant concepts of God, subjectivity, and gender. With each breath, human beings are respondents to (or if not, at least recipients of) the perpetual divine invitation to become. This theology of dynamism is not only about a God who holds difference within Oneness but a God who can best be discerned and manifested through receptive, spiritually supple human beings. For Islamic feminists, these concepts of relationship are deeply productive for thinking about innate fluidity within human beings—if we are indeed sites of continuous divine unveilings, our understandings of gender and sexuality would best be served by being open to flux, inclusiveness, and diversity. Gender and sexuality resist complete knowability. While a person might know themselves with some level of certainty

in the present instance, other moments might reveal other forms of self-knowing, unveiling, and transformation as an unfolding of their spiritual path.

This Sufi paradigm is thus able to both embrace human diversity and simultaneously present a universal set of spiritual imperatives for human beings. For Ibn ‘Arabī and other Sufis, transformation and progress on the spiritual path demand that a person strive to purify the self from all internal false deities, those grasping negative impulses that greedily attempt to take hold of the heart. The process of polishing, scrubbing away, or weeding out the consuming negative instincts of, for example, anger, greed, arrogance, and other forms of egotism, removes veils that obfuscate the true nature of the heart. Spiritual practices enable the process of purification aimed at facilitating the inherent light of the divine qualities to manifest within the human being. These spiritual imperatives, the path for realizing them, and the ultimate goal are identical for all human beings, irrespective of gender or sexual identity. Ibn ‘Arabī explicitly states that the aspirational model for human identity that embodies knowledge of all reality, *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, applies in full and equal measure to men and women alike (1911, 2:35).

Ibn ‘Arabī frequently invokes the prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) that states “One who knows oneself, knows one’s Lord” (1946, 210). Given this intimate connection between humanity and God, notions of human nature are closely related to theology. Within this religious anthropology, the mysterious nature of God, spoken and unspoken with the use of Ibn ‘Arabī’s paradoxical language, also relates to understandings of human nature. His dialectical approach creates a productive tension exploding binary and linear conceptions of God, human beings, and as I intend to show, gender.

Thus, the use of paradox, ambivalence, and contradiction as reflected in Ibn ‘Arabī’s “yes” and “no” enables and sustains a fluid conceptual apparatus when approaching our understandings of human nature. The use of dialectic enables one to both use conventional language and overcome the established confines of such language, enabling glimmers of alternative conceptions that might not be part of the conventional discourse. This method has particular implications for gender, where the use of a traditional hierarchical gender symbolic as one movement of the dialectic serves to convey a contextually grounded set of meanings. Then, the disruption of established meanings by introducing a new and egalitarian set of gender narratives as the other part of the dialectical approach enables an opening up and potential transformation of the gender imaginary in vital ways. In the next section, I illustrate how Ibn ‘Arabī’s supple use of metaphor results in paradox, ambivalence, and contradiction—all organic elements of his Sufi method—that result, in turn, in generative spaces of tension that creatively interrupt fixed conceptions of gender.

Sex and gender: Mystical subversions and Sufi apertures

Scholars of hermeneutics point to the powerful function of metaphor to evoke complex levels of meanings lying beneath the surface and to expand the semantic field of the text in imaginative ways. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur observes that metaphor generates “interplay between resemblances and differences that gives rise to tension at the level of the utterance,” which allows for novel perspectives on reality resisted by more “ordinary visions . . . attached to the ordinary use of words” (1976, 68). He argues that metaphor, characterized by a surplus of interpretive possibilities, expands the semantic field, allowing for the “revelation of a new dimension of reality and truth” (68). In Ibn ‘Arabī’s extensive use of gendered metaphors to describe all principles of reality, including the realms of cosmology, nature, and humanity, one indeed finds evidence for these theoretical insights.

Ibn ‘Arabī uses words like “fathers” and “mothers,” “male” and “female,” “sexual union” and “offspring,” in distinctive ways to denote varying spiritual realities and relationships within God, the universe, and nature as well as within and among human beings. In this symbolic matrix, masculine and feminine principles pervade all spheres of being in complementary and relational ways, and all of existence is birthed through the union or “marriage” of these two principles (Ibn ‘Arabī 1911, 2:167). As such “maleness” signifies an active mode while “femaleness” reflects receptivity to action and the ability to be changed through such action, and “sexual intercourse” occurs between “mothers” and “fathers” who unite through the attraction of “love” to create “offspring.” These metaphors clearly reflect the dominant gender ideology where an active or “male” reality acts on the receptive or “female” reality, which is then transformed into a site of reproductive creativity and growth (507). Here, all things receptive to the actions of another are seen to be “female.” While these masculine and feminine principles are viewed as distinctive, ontologically each is considered an equally vital and necessary contributor to creation; both are thus fundamentally relational in nature.

Despite an appropriate feminist alarm at such seemingly restrictive gender significations, it might be helpful to hold such anxiety in abeyance for just a bit. For Ibn ‘Arabī, there is a clear recognition that the principles of “maleness” and “femaleness” are not exclusively associated with men and women respectively. Each human being reflects a mixture of activity and receptivity in a variety of areas, through the coming together of various “male” and “female” principles. Therefore, contingent on an individual’s nature, spiritual state, personality, context, or relationship, a man can be in a state of receptivity and thus designated “female,” while a woman in an active state might be considered “male.” Context, relationship, and changing dynamics rather than anatomy determine an active/receptive or masculine/feminine state. Ibn ‘Arabī’s

fluid and dynamic metaphors have the potential to reflect and simultaneously disrupt normative ideas of gender and sexuality in all kinds of productive ways.

An example illustrating Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of context and relationship can be found in his discussion of speech: “The speaker is a father. The listener is a mother. The speech discourse between them is a marriage. What comes into existence from that [interaction] in the understanding of the listener is a child” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1911, 1:139). One can apply these gendered principles in nonessentialist ways to some autobiographical information that Ibn ‘Arabī reports about his relationships with female teachers. He tells us that in a formative period of his life he met, studied with, and served as a disciple to two women saints, Fatima bint Ibn al-Muthanna and Yasmina Umm al-Fuqara (Ibn ‘Arabī 1988). He compellingly describes his devotion to these women savants who taught him and nurtured his spiritual growth. For example, Ibn ‘Arabī enthusiastically relates that his teacher Fatima commended his spiritual state and complete receptivity to her teachings, informing his fellow students that unlike those among them who were preoccupied with other concerns, Ibn ‘Arabī came to her “with all of himself. When he rises up it is with all of himself and when he sits it is with his whole self, leaving nothing of himself elsewhere. That is how it should be on the Way” (1988, 143). Reading these stories through Ibn ‘Arabī’s gendered metaphors, in the context of the refining relationship of discipleship, these women teachers “fathered” Ibn ‘Arabī’s learning. As a result of his “feminine” state of receptivity, their wisdom was able to touch him and be absorbed by him, thereby birthing his own deepening insight. The relevant point here is that rather than biology, a particular situation and relationship indicate whether one’s state is characterized by activity or receptivity. So, Ibn ‘Arabī’s apparently essentialized gender categories are effectively turned in on themselves to deessentialize and expand understandings of gendered human beings.

Another example of how Ibn ‘Arabī both employs gendered metaphors while simultaneously subverting the dominant symbolic field is reflected in his discussion of creative forces in the natural world. Using prevailing metaphors of human sexuality and procreation, he tells us that the sky as father acts on the earth/mother, and as a result all things upon the earth are created (1911, 1:131). However, in this poetics of creation, there is a notable absence of a hierarchical value that deems the masculine as the positive, spiritual, heavenly dimension while deriding the feminine as negative, earthly, and dejectedly corporeal. Instead, we find in Ibn ‘Arabī a profoundly spiritual evaluation of the earth and corporeality:

[The earth] gives all of the benefits from her essence [*dhāt*] and is the location [*maḥall*] of all good. Thus she is the most powerful [*a’azz*] of

the bodies. The movement of all things does not contest her own movement because they do not leave her sphere. Every foundation manifests in the earth its authority and she is the patient [*ṣabūr*], the receptive one [*qābila*], the immutable one, the firm one. Her mountains still her quaking, mountains that God made to be her anchors. Whenever she moves from fearful awe of God, God secures her by means of these anchors. So she becomes still with the tranquility of those of faithful certainty. From the earth, the people of faith learn their certainty. Therefore, it is the mother from whom we come and to whom we return. And from her we will come forth once again. To her we are submitted and entrusted. She is the most subtle of foundations [*arkān*] in meaning. She accepts density, darkness, and hardness only in order to conceal the treasures that God has entrusted to her. (1911, 2:455)

In Ibn ‘Arabī’s cosmology he poignantly and powerfully depicts the relationship between the sky and earth as one defined by reciprocity and mutuality. The earth, receptive to the action of the sky, is prolific and births abundance of all sorts. The earth exemplifies, among others, the divine attributes of stability, strength, and subtlety—thus being a teacher to those seeking to cultivate faith, tranquility, and certitude. In this evocative depiction, the earth mirrors an amalgam of divine qualities that provide instruction for perceptive seekers to advance their own spiritual progress.

Ibn ‘Arabī conjures up a nuanced and alluring combination of divine qualities that are deeply resonant with Qur’anic images of God. By describing the earth as *al-Ṣabūr*, the Patient One, an oft-invoked divine name in the Qur’an, he creates for a Muslim audience an explicit link between God and the earth. The earth, like God, conceals its hidden treasures.⁹ Describing the earth as “the mother from whom we come and to whom we return” is a loud and clear invocation of the Qur’anic verse “From Allah we come and to Allah we return” (Q2:156). It foregrounds the human being’s intimate and immanent physical relationship with the earth, as well as with one’s mother. By interweaving maternal, earthy, and generative images with powerful and majestic divine qualities, Ibn ‘Arabī urges his audience toward an integration of “masculine” and “feminine” principles within both the earth and human beings. Through his compelling set of Qur’anic associations with the earth, Ibn ‘Arabī deftly weaves together the positive and spiritually vibrant associations between God, mothers, and the earth. A poetics where the earth reverberates

⁹ This association evokes a well-known *ḥadīth al-Qudsī*, where God states “I was a hidden treasure and I loved/yearned to be known. Hence I created all things in order to be known.”

divine presence, provides spiritual teaching, and is the locus of human origin and return radically shifts the reigning symbolic horizon.

Ibn 'Arabī effectively invites his reader to both traverse and reformulate a history of patriarchal imagination. His exalted portrayal of the earth—and its intimate neighbor, the human body—presents an unequivocal rejection of traditional patriarchal binaries that result in devaluing the earth as the realm of inferior lowly materiality and embodiment—a necessary trap of human existence that one ultimately seeks to overcome. The body and the earth are profoundly imbued with spiritual value. For Ibn 'Arabī, the father/sky and mother/earth are inextricably related as contributors to the very process of all creation. By casting the creative principles of his cosmology in the normative gender categories of his time, and then conflating, subverting, and reconstituting dominant ideas and evaluations of those gendered norms, he daringly invites a radical reconfiguration of gendered concepts.

Ibn 'Arabī further confounds the seemingly gender-specific principles of activity and receptivity by stating that all creation is ontologically “female” in relation to God, who impregnates each being with existence. He writes: “Other than the Creator, there is not in this universe a male,” and those who are generally referred to as males are all “really female,” since there is nothing in creation that is “not acted upon” (Ibn 'Arabī 1911, 6:445). While a feminist reader must be wary of the ways in which the language of maleness as associated with activity and femaleness with receptivity reiterates dominant notions of patriarchal power, we are simultaneously informed that all humanity is female. On deeper analysis, this statement reflects an unsaying, or a semi-otic move that subverts even as it appears to reinscribe dominant gender concepts. This supple and relational ontology pushes the reader toward a more agile, fluid conception of gender.

Elsewhere, Ibn 'Arabī explicitly uses metaphors of pregnancy, labor, and childbirth to describe the origin of all creation (Austin 1984, 8–9). Describing God in the state of solitary Oneness before creation, he depicts the not-yet-existing entities within the One as heavy with potential and thus exerting a metaphysical condition of pressure. Ibn 'Arabī uses the term *karb*, indicating labor during childbirth, to describe the state of distress induced by the not-yet-existing entities within the One (Austin 1984, 9). This precipitates the divine creative force—described as the Breath of the Merciful (*Nafas al-Rahmān*)—which, in an act of loving compassion, emancipates the not-yet-existing entities into the sphere of existence. Like women who bear children, God births the cosmos and thereby reveals Her divine treasures.

In Ibn 'Arabī's vibrant, pulsating, and corporeal metaphors, we encounter a God who desires and who loves to be known, who experiences anguish without creation, and whose creative process is captured through images

of pregnancy, labor, and mothering. These metaphors invoke a vital aspect of deep connection, interiority, and nurture between God and humanity. Moreover, a God who *needs* humanity for the realization, manifestation, and fulfillment of divine possibilities subverts hierarchical patriarchal theologies that define God as only omnipotent, transcendent, and independent of humanity. This is not simply an invincible God whose unadulterated power demands unconditional obedience but rather a God whose love and yearning are the very impetus for creation. In fact one of the most oft-invoked divine names by Muslims, *al-Raḥmān*, the Merciful, is derived from the same root (r-h-m) as the word for a woman's womb (*rahim*). Confounding prevailing gendered hierarchies, Ibn 'Arabī instead presents a God-human relationship characterized by intimacy, closeness, love, and mutuality, all of which contribute toward a nourishing theology and religious anthropology. These theological images can certainly provide the ontological soil to sustain and develop a Muslim feminist ethics of relationality and radical interdependence.¹⁰

Ibn 'Arabī's "feminine" metaphors for God must be juxtaposed against his statement that God is the only "male" in existence while all that is created is "female." It appears that the gendered theological metaphors he uses are determined by the specific kinds of relationships, contexts, and dynamics that he seeks to depict in a given moment, and these are invoked in changing ways. He deftly employs conventionally "masculine" and "feminine" depictions of God and humanity while simultaneously undoing the normative associations of these gendered categories. As such, his gender-inclusive metaphors powerfully recognize and affirm normative identities while at the same time shifting underlying assumptions governing such norms.

Feminist scholars of other religious traditions have compellingly argued that a gender-inclusive symbolic system does not automatically translate into forms of social equality or even simply less restrictive gender roles (Jantzen 1995, 28). However, French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray (1996), in examining primarily Jewish and Christian images of God, argues that the development of authentic forms of female subjectivity is in fact partially contingent on the presence and pervasiveness of female images of the divine. One could make the case that Irigaray's insights have a particular relevance to a Sufi framework, since the human being, man and woman alike, is nothing *but* the embodiment of divine attributes. Ibn 'Arabī's use of both masculine and feminine images of God can be seen as ways to validate some prevailing forms of male and female subjectivity, consistent with his recurring statements that men and women have complete and equal access to the station

¹⁰ Ayesha Hidayatullah (2014, 191) points to the need for Islamic feminists to theorize gender in ways that foreground interdependence without resorting to gender essentialisms.

of *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, that ultimate human state of embodying all the divine attributes in perfect balance.

Given this intimacy between God and humanity, Ibn ‘Arabī’s explicitly gender-inclusive metaphors for the divine are powerful: they not only affirm women’s subjectivities but also destabilize a masculinist symbolic economy. Ibn ‘Arabī’s diverse and fluid gendered images of God are fruitful for those in search of inclusive and expansive spaces to extend the Muslim imaginary. These gendered images echo Islamic studies scholar Shahab Ahmed’s insight that metaphor in Sufism serves as a “means by which Muslims reach upwards, inwards, and outwards beyond the form of the word, (allowing) precisely for the multidimensional exploration of meaning(s)” (2016, 391). In my view it is precisely this expansive reach of Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphors for God that allows for notions of gender to be stretched, deepened, and enriched in increasingly inclusive ways.

For Islamic feminists, fluid categories of gender—where maleness and femaleness pervade reality in a variety of combinations—encourage the rethinking of gendered and sexual binaries. If men and women are each constituted by varying and relational active and receptive capacities—if, in fact human beings are seen as in-between, dynamic, *barzakhi* creatures who carry both/and capacities—this has important implications for diverse gendered and sexual expressions.¹¹ Men and women are not simply defined by essential gendered markers of activity/“maleness” or receptivity/“femaleness” but rather are constituted by an array and combinations of these principles. Such a religious anthropology, among other things, helps us to imagine sexual diversity as reflecting the range of possibilities and combinations of gendered principles. Moreover, the idea that human beings are ontologically constituted by the interrelationships of *multiple* divine attributes in distinct and varied combinations deepens an ontology of human diversity—all gender and sexual diversity are part of a matrix of physical, psychological, affective, and spiritual possibilities emanating from the One. As such, the entire range of gendered and sexual diversities reflects varied manifestations of divine qualities in the world.

Having powerfully affirmed both traditionally masculine and feminine images of God, we arrive at what I consider the more profound and transformative aspect of what I call Ibn ‘Arabī’s “God-human talk.”¹² And here it is:

¹¹ Sara Haq Husseini (2012), in her analyses of Sufi notions of liminality, lucidly reflects on gender and sexuality as states of intermediacy confounding binaries.

¹² Asma Barlas (2002, 100), in her powerful antipatriarchal reading of the Qur’an, takes an opposite view, arguing that God’s unrepresentability in human terms is what disables patriarchal theology. She views all anthropomorphic images of God, whether presented by Sufis or *kalam* theologians, as misrepresentative.

locking the Divine into any particular or singular set of images is spiritually perilous. Ibn ‘Arabī cautions against the error of binding [*taqyīd*]: the seeker must resist all impulses to capture, reduce, or fix God into any one theological register, form, metaphor, or theoretical formulation (1946, 50–51).¹³ Within Ibn ‘Arabī’s hermeneutics, diverse images of God serve as signposts—with one hand you embrace it, and with the other, you release it so as to sustain the on-going journey into the Divine. Ibn ‘Arabī’s pithy statement is persuasive:

If you affirm transcendence you bind,
 If you affirm immanence you define
 If you affirm both, you hit the mark.
 You are a leader (*imam*) and a master in the spiritual sciences.
 (in Sells 1994, 100)

From this perspective, both God and the human being (whose goal is to embody a refined balance of the divine attributes) are characterized by continual transformations that cannot be encapsulated by a singular set of images or characteristics. Ibn ‘Arabī’s use of varied gendered images for God creates a mystical dialectic of both saying and unsaying the divine so that the seeker can ultimately remain faithful to the mysterious and changing reality of the Divine. As a spiritual savant who reveals God’s immanent connection to humanity, male and female, Ibn ‘Arabī offers the reader gender-inclusive images of God. As a custodian of monotheism, he signals God’s transcendence of all gendered human binaries. Instead, he points to the vast openness of the divine, which heralds the vast openness of the human being who microcosmically embodies the totality of the divine attributes. Simultaneously asserting and undoing gender in his theology and religious anthropology, Ibn ‘Arabī with uncanny exactitude embraces the bounty and largesse of a simultaneous and paradoxical yes-and-no position. This approach to God also marks Ibn ‘Arabī’s approach to the human being who, for the Muslim mystics, ought to be the child of the moment, refreshed and newly revealed in every instance.¹⁴

Here Sufi epistemology resists static notions of gender, allowing instead for novel ways of imagining God and humanity beyond binary formulations. It seeks to push the seeker to an existential mode of openness, to receive the

¹³ Sells (1994, 78–81) discusses Ibn ‘Arabī’s view of the angel’s error of binding due to a limited understanding of God.

¹⁴ Sufis commonly use the phrase *ibn al-waqt*, literally translated as “son of the moment” to represent a human subjectivity receptive to the divine presence in each moment. I have adjusted the phrase to render it gender neutral here.

changing face of the divine in every moment, and to be receptive to a constantly transforming state as the potential microcosm of the divine attributes. As such, the mystical paradox generates a capaciousness that can forge a path of liberation from restrictive gender molds without simply saying that gender does not exist. It does, and it does not. Sufi language is thus deeply iconoclastic. As such, I would argue that it resonates with the true spirit of the prophetic revolution, which unhinges idolatry, in this case the idolatry of reified and fixed categories of gender. It retains mystery in the most compelling of ways—as an invitation to embark on the path of a transforming self with fluid gender experiences as part of the journey into the nature of the Real.

Gender, ethics, and contemporary feminist theory

That gender continues to be a mystery in a number of secular and religious spaces is reflected in contemporary feminist debates. When reading some of these feminist debates through the lenses of Islamic mysticism, one could argue that feminists have a variety of ways of “saying and unsaying” gender. Some traverse positions between the “yes” and “no” in compelling ways.¹⁵ Three brief examples are illustrative. First, contemporary American philosopher and feminist theorist Judith Butler, in her now classic *Gender Trouble* (1990), has irreverently muddled a number of binary categories characterizing previous feminist thinking, including the classic divide between sex and gender, men and women, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual. According to Butler, all these categories are the product of social construction. Whenever we accept any of these binary formulations as natural or given, it signifies that we have internalized a hegemonic system of gendered power (1990, 7). She famously argues that there is no essential sexual biological base that is “naturally” present upon which gender, gendered roles, and sexual desire are inscribed. For Butler the gendered self is produced through a set of performances: that is, gender is an effect of the stylized repetitions of dominant behaviors, speech, and thought-forms that shape a culture. Eschewing a binary logic of gender, she also suggests that novel and iterative performances of the self may contribute to the undoing of prevailing gender regimes. Butler’s intervention invites a potentially soaring fluidity in understanding sex/gender systems, not allowing us to rest easily with any

¹⁵ I do not assume the universality of Western theories that might then be applied to “other” societies as secondary case studies. Instead, I attempt a more dialogical approach, where my immersion in premodern Islamic mysticism informs my primary theoretical lenses. As such, I engage in conversation with contemporary feminist debates, an approach that might be described as decolonial.

form of essentialist difference. Whether or not one accepts these radically free-floating conceptions of embodiment, a value of Butler's theoretical work is that she unfetters reified notions of sex/gender. If we apply a mystical lens to Butler's approach, it becomes apparent that she is performing a sweeping act of negation, an unsaying of gender. For example, we could well imagine her saying a decisive "no" to Ibn Rushd in his desire for certainty in epistemological categorization.

Second, French feminist Luce Irigaray presents a compelling contrast to Butler's perspective. Irigaray embraces a full recognition of gendered differences between men and women, stating rather emphatically "To wish to get rid of sexual difference is to call for a genocide more radical than any form of destruction there has ever been in History" (Irigaray 1993, 12). In my view, she is suggesting that a categorical negation without an affirmation of sexual difference may potentially obliterate the mystery that is gender. Yet her affirmation of sexual difference is nuanced and subtle, and for her the challenge is to maintain gender difference *without* fixing these differences into a single reified set of essences.

Jean-Joseph Goux succinctly summarizes Irigaray's position into two fundamental postulates: "[first], to overthrow patriarchal power does not mean denying the difference between the sexes but living the relation between them differently . . . [second] to assert the differences between the sexes is not the same thing as positing an essential femininity or masculinity—it is sexuation that is essential, not the content of the dogmas fixing once and for all, in an exhaustive and closed definition, what for eternity belongs to masculine and what belongs to the feminine" (1994, 181). As such, Irigaray asserts a "yes" to gender differences while refusing to fix or close these differences into any one moment or singular reality.

To this finely crafted notion of gender differences, I turn to the insights of feminist Christian theologian Catherine Keller: "Once we can think gender without firm foundations and unquestionable boundaries, but nonetheless intensify its power to materialize our humanity, we may perhaps endow this erotic destabilization with a certain agapic persistence. Then we do not need to plunge—as is so academically tempting—from totalism to relativism, from the absolute into the dissolute: the third space of the resolute begins to open. A subtler sociality, a relationality in which we at once undo and embrace each other, becomes dimly visible" (2008, 925). Keller's perspective resonates to me as a feminist posture that exists in the spaces between Ibn 'Arabī's "yes" and "no," what Sufis might call the *barzakh*, or spaces of in-betweenness that simultaneously hold difference and unity without collapsing tensions. Keller represents precisely the kind of nonbinary approach that would cause Ibn Rushd and his more ratiocentric progeny (of all disciplinary ilks) to become

ashen faced with epistemological anxiety at such an unrelenting uncertainty. Instead, her view resonates with Ibn ‘Arabī’s more nimble method, which allows for a tentative grasp of gender as real without rendering that reality firm, fixed, and transparent. My brief foray into the works of three contemporary feminist theorists illustrates that gender remains an elusive mystery in all kinds of discourses, despite our most focused attention. For Islamic feminists Ibn ‘Arabī’s works offer, in my view, openings that push us to precisely the third space of a “subtler sociality,” a relationality in which “we at once undo and embrace each other,” to echo Keller’s delightful invitation.

My close reading of Ibn ‘Arabī’s supple theological imaginary is intended to retrieve and foreground an Islamic tradition of creativity, boldness, inclusivity, and capaciousness in thinking about God, reality, and the gendered human being. Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas, if one reads through a decolonial feminist lens, provide a way to think productively about the history of imagining gender fluidity—an intellectual project that has only recently been taken up by Western feminists.¹⁶ His work provides Muslim feminists with an indigenous archive of troubling gender in ways that are deeply embedded in a Muslim cosmology but that can participate in a broader theoretical dialogue with other paradigms and worldviews that seek to destabilize static hierarchical gendered narratives. Ibn ‘Arabī’s approach offers Muslim feminists a genealogy of gendered thinking that sustains an openness to unknowing, to discovery, to tentativeness, and to the awareness that any conceptual grasp we have is partial and changing.

As we approach the human being as ultimately a mystery, it is imperative to recognize, simultaneously, a universal and shared humanity (in Ibn ‘Arabī’s terms, the capacity for *Insaniyya*), as well as an individual’s unique specificities, through and with which they have to journey in order to seek to embody their archetypal possibilities. The latter are informed not only by varying contexts and by distinct individual constitutions but also by the changing nature of the divine, transforming within the human heart and on the social horizon.¹⁷ Such a religious anthropology demands a dynamic epistemological method, receptive to fluidity, to holding complex and malleable concepts of gender. Ibn ‘Arabī might nourish Islamic feminists in search of a gender and sexual theory that at once serves the need for social justice within the

¹⁶ See the work of María Lugones (2012) on decolonial feminisms that seek to free subjugated knowledges emerging from outside the historically colonial centers of knowledge production and categorizations.

¹⁷ A popular Qur’anic verse (41:53) points to the different locations for divine unveilings: “We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves, until it is clear to them that it is the truth. Is it not enough for them to know that thy Sustainer is witness over everything?”

varied social and political realities we inhabit while keeping us open to overcoming the current structural limitations of being in the world. Together with him, we might imagine an open horizon for becoming, one that impels us to embody ever more refined modes of being—modes of justice, of care, of beauty, of reciprocity, of love, and of being loved—a world to aspire toward.

For broader feminist theory, Ibn ‘Arabī’s gender fluidity points to an alternative history of gender bending in a more global archive of human history. My exploration of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas and the contributions of some contemporary feminists suggest that perhaps theory is best served by a flexible tool kit. We might be enriched by the awareness that the categories and concepts we have are perhaps not yet ready for an open horizon, which beckons about the possibilities of being more deeply human in ways that we have yet to imagine. The implication of taking such an approach seriously, for all kinds of feminist debates and theoretical developments in the humanities more broadly, is the recognition that our theoretical frameworks are best served by an intentional and conscious attentiveness to fluidity and openness. Perhaps the fruits of such an open horizon exist, or have existed, in communities of spiritual maturity where the mystery and existential possibility of each human life is fully available, where the diversity of gender and sexual expression exist comfortably as multiple manifestations of the mysterious One, embraced and valued without becoming definitive or defining of the human being. Or perhaps we might reach longingly for that possibility, aspire to yet unimagined ways of inhabiting our humanity that beckon us to an unknown and unfolding destination.

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