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Beauty and the Feminine Element of Spirituality¹

The Prophet Muhammad once said, “God is beautiful, and He loves beauty.” He also said, “Three things in your world have been made lovely to me: women, perfume, and prayer is the delight of my eyes.” What is the significance of the love of beauty for spirituality? And how does gender enter into this delicate topic? Ultimately, the question of being male or female may fade in importance when compared to the aesthetic shock of the contemplation of divine beauty. Yet the fact that we are embedded in a particular social and historical moment makes it impossible for us to ignore the roles and expectations that society has placed upon men and women. The transformations of global economies over the past century have created a situation in which women’s participation in education, culture, and religion has become public in an unprecedented fashion, in every corner of the world. Perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned from the changes we now experience is not that feminine spirituality is different from masculine spirituality; instead, listening to the voices of insightful women may allow us to step aside from the limitations of the egotistical patriarchy that has unjustly dismissed women as inferior to men.

¹ Presented at the Conference on “Women and Sufism: Centenary Celebration of the Birth of Samiha Ayverdi,” Istanbul, Turkey, December 16, 2005

It must be acknowledged that all the major religious traditions of the world have experienced similar forms of social organization through male-dominated political structures. The fact remains that women have played important spiritual roles, and yet this is generally not acknowledged in official histories. One of the major achievements of scholarship in recent years has been the effort to recover the voices of women in all the major civilized regions of the world, from which on the whole they had been mysteriously excluded. History was once considered to consist exclusively of the actions of kings and great men, but increasingly it is being admitted that our understanding of the past will be incomplete and distorted unless we comprehend the parts that women have played.

In the history of religion, considerable attention has been paid to the contributions of women mystics to Christian spirituality, and there are numerous publications addressed to this important topic. If we turn to Islamic spirituality, the situation is more complicated, particularly due to the relative lack of writings by women before recent times. It is possible to get some access to the spiritual lives of Muslim women, yet we must rely primarily on writings by men. As an example, Jami concluded his Persian biographical work on Sufis, *Nafahat al-Uns* (*The Breezes of Intimacy*), with a brief appendix entitled, "On the Remembrance of the Women Knowers of God who have Attained the Levels of the Men of God." In it he writes,

The author of *The Meccan Openings*, Muhyi al-Din ibn al-'Arabi (God have mercy on him), in the seventy-third chapter, after mentioning some of the generations of the men of God, says, "Everything that we have said regarding these men, as men, includes women, though there is more reference to men. Someone was asked, 'How many "Substitutes" (*abdal*) are there?' He replied, 'Forty souls.' He was asked, 'Why did you not say forty men?' He answered, 'Because there are women among them.'"

The master Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, author of *Generations of the Masters*, compiled a particular book, the *Memoir of the Spiritual States of Women Devotees and Knowers of God*, and he has clarified much in explanation of the spiritual states of many of them. The poet al-Mutanabbi has written a verse, alluding to the fact that "sun" (*shams*) is feminine and "moon" (*qamar*) is masculine in Arabic:

Were women as I have described,
 Women would be superior to men.
 Femininity is no defect in the sun,
 Nor should the moon be proud of masculinity.

The lost treatise of al-Sulami has been rediscovered, and it has been translated into English by Rkia Laroui Cornell.² This text permits us to see with a little more detail the ambiguity and sensitivity of the issue of gender in Sufi hagiography (note that the verse by al-Mutanabbi is really a backhanded compliment to women, since it makes one exceptional woman appear to be a very strange phenomenon indeed). This ambiguous position is stated with peculiar force by one of the women who figures in that anthology, `A'isha bint Ahmad of Merv: "Concealment is more appropriate for women than unveiling, for women are not to be exposed."

This is a surprising answer that `A'isha gave to a question about the kind of mystical experience that the Sufis call unveiling (*kashf*). It is unexpected, because the text itself provides abundant evidence of such spiritual experiences among women. But in a sense, this answer illustrates one of the main problems confronting anyone who seeks to understand the subject we are addressing: how can we have access to the feminine dimension of Islamic culture without trespassing in the private sphere? On one level, this quotation explains why so few women are represented in biographical works in general and in biographies of Sufis in particular. That is, in most cases, biographies of women (when given at all) are included as an appendix to the biographies of men that are the "main" subject of the book. Certainly misogyny was one attitude to be found in Sufi texts. Still, on another level, the notion of concealment and privacy for women may help explain both the relatively small space granted to women in Sufi writings, and the brevity and lack of personal detail in these biographies. Where women do figure in Sufi biographies, one finds typical patterns of presentation that may well be explained by predictable male-female dynamics. How many

² Abū `Abd ar-Rahmān as-Sulamī, *Early Sufi women: Dhikr an-niswa al-muta`abbidāt as-Sūfiyyāt*, ed. and trans. Rkia Elaroui Cornell (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999).

times has it been said of an impressive woman, that she was, as it were, a man in the form of a woman? This sort of negative compliment seems to be the last resort of the male hagiographer who is perplexed and bewildered (and struck with admiration) by the spiritual power of a woman.

Yet despite the common omission of women from the public record of religion and spirituality, it is striking to see how frequently and how inevitably women figure prominently in key discussions of the nature of love and beauty as avenues to the divine. Plato in the *Symposium* depicts Socrates as receiving instruction from the priestess Diotima on the philosophical teachings of love and beauty. When the Qur'an tells the story of Joseph and Zulaykha, it is called "the most beautiful of stories." Why is that? According to the Persian Sufi master Rūzbihān Baqli (d. 1209), it is because

Worldly love is the beginning of that divine love. For both beginner and adept there is an unavoidable condition for reaching the intoxication of divine love—and that is to clothe the created with divinity. There is proof in support of chaste love in the religious law of Muhammad (God's prayers be upon him). The word of God (who is great and mighty): "We shall tell you the most beautiful of stories" (Qur'an 12:3), that is, we shall tell you the story of the lover and the beloved, Joseph and Zulaykha (peace be upon them), and also the love of Jacob and Joseph (peace be upon them), for the tale of love is the most beautiful of stories for those who have passion and love.³

In the biography of Ruzbihan, it is related that he caused a sensation when he returned to Shiraz and first preached in public. In the oldest version, the story goes like this:

When the shaykh came from Pasā to Shiraz, the first day that he preached in the 'Atiq mosque, in the midst of his sermon, he said, "When I entered the mosque, in the corner of the herb sellers a woman was advising her daughter, saying, 'My dear, your mother advises you to cover your face, and don't show everyone your beauty from the window. This should not be, for by reason of your loveliness and beauty, someone may fall into temptation. Don't you hear my words and accept my advice?'"

³ Ruzbihan Baqli, 'Abhar al-'ashiqin, in *Teachings of Sufism*, trans. Carl W. Ernst (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), p. 90.

When Rūzbihān heard these words, he wanted to tell that woman, "Although you advise her and forbid her, let her show herself! She should not listen to these words of yours or accept this advice, for she is beautiful, and beauty has no rest until love becomes joined to it."

When the shaykh said this, one of the travelers on the path of God was present. The arrow of these words hit the target of his heart, so that he cried out and gave up his spirit. The cry went up in the town that "Shaykh Rūzbihān is cutting souls to bits with the sword of his words!" The people of the town turned toward him and became his disciples.

Later accounts add to Rūzbihān's advice to the mother the comment that "Love and beauty made a pact in pre-eternity never to be separate from one another."⁴ Indeed, in his own major treatise on love, *The Jasmine of the Lovers*, Ruzbihan engages in a dialogue with an unnamed woman who challenges him to define the relationship between human love and divine love, so that she acted in a way as his teacher.

Another famous Sufi, Ibn `Arabi (d. 1240), comments on the divine beauty and takes as his point of departure the divine name al-Jamil, "the Beautiful," as attested in the Qur'an and hadith. In an introductory poem to a discussion of this divine name in *al-Futuhat al-Makkiya*, he sets forth the enigma of the divine beloved whose beauty is beyond the reach of the senses, and yet who is somehow witnessed by the lover's heart—and the love of this divine beauty is the model for all the great loves celebrated in Arabic poetry.

Beautiful but not longing, luminous but not seen,
 yet hearts witness Him, just as they do not know.
 "Eyes do not encompass Him" except for one
 whom master intellects have left behind.
 If I call Him "beloved," I would not be a liar,
 and if I call Him "witnessed," that is what I know.
 There is no other beloved but He,
 and only Salmas, Laylas, and Zaynabs are for the veil.
 They are the curtains that veil, that are conveyed
 by the poetry of lovers, and their prose,

⁴ For details, see my *Ruzbihan Baqli: Mysticism and the Rhetoric of Sainthood in Persian Sufism*, Curzon Sufi Series, 4 (London: Curzon Press, 1996).

Like Majnun and Layla, and those who came before,
like Bishr and Hind—my heart cannot bear their names.⁵

In this way Ibn `Arabi explains the relation of the creative and transcendent divine beauty to the beautiful things of this world, and this can only be done through the names of male and female lovers. It should be recalled that Ibn `Arabi himself studied with several prominent women Sufis, including Fatima of Cordova, whom he praised as a great mystic, and he also wrote poems in honor of 14 women to whom he gave authorization (*ijaza*) to be Sufi teachers.

Nevertheless, despite these striking references to women, it can be argued that the idealization of women has also served as a kind of symbolic or intellectual prison, particularly if this means defining women into an entirely separate role or metaphysical status distinct from men. But the reality is that women have been eminent spiritual teachers who have indeed earned the respect of men. Although shrouded in legend, and often used as the exception justifying the marginalization of other women, the stories of Rabi'a al-`Adawiyya (eighth century) clearly show her as the teacher (*mu'addiba*) of men.⁶ The great master of the Indian Chishti order, Shaykh Nizam al-Din Awliya' (d. 1325), paid tribute to the charisma of Bibi Fatima Sam:

When the lion has come out of the forest, nobody asks if it is male or female; the children of Adam must obey and show respect, whether it is male or female. Now, in the stories of Fatima Sam there has been much said regarding her extreme piety and old age. I have seen her. She was a great woman.⁷

Sayyida Zaynab bint al-Rifa'i (d. 1232), the daughter of Shaykh Ahmad al-Rifa'i, was described by a biographer as "the patient, humble lady, the one who recollected God, the perfect woman saint, the pure knower of God, the pious God-fearing one, the

⁵ Ibn `Arabi, *al-Futuhat al-Makkiya*, II, 542 (ch. 142). The phrase "eyes do not encompass Him" recalls Qur'an 6:104.

⁶ Rkia Elaroui Cornell, "Rabi'a, from Narrative to Myth: Tropics of Identity of a Muslim Woman Saint," Ph.D. dissertation, Free University of Amsterdam, 2013.

⁷ `Abd al-Haq Muhaddith Dihlawi, *Akhbar al-akhyar*, in *Teachings of Sufism*, p. 186.

hopeful luminous one, the one who took precedence over saintly men, through her lofty qualities and her illustrious spiritual states.”⁸

These clear statements of admiration for women as spiritual teachers have been rare before modern times, but they are important historical indications that the spiritual equality of men and women was recognized in certain quarters, despite the common dismissal of women to the private sphere in many Muslim societies. Now, we are in an age when necessity decrees that both men and women need to seek education and participate in the modern workforce on a scale previously undreamt of. The spread of mass literacy through policies of universal education has made it possible for countless talented women to undertake careers that would have been unthinkable a century ago. This is no less true in the Middle East than it is in Europe and America. The reconfiguration of religion in secular states has opened up the possibility of women's public leadership in matters of religion and culture even while it has also increased the factor of conservative control of women's dress and behavior in other sectors.

In her memoirs, my former teacher Annemarie Schimmel has written the following:

During my second stay (in Turkey), new friends helped me to gain access to another part of Turkish culture, to the best traditions of Turkish Sufism. There were successful businessmen who yet would spend night after night in silent meditation, and there was Samiha Ayverdi, the towering figure among mystics and writers, author of numerous books and articles in which she conjures up the traditional life. In her house I was introduced to the culture of Ottoman Turkey, and she and her family opened my eyes to the eternal beauty of Islamic fine arts, in particular calligraphy. I loved to listen to her discourses which went on in long, swinging sentences, while the sky over the Bosphorus seemed to be covered with clouds of roses. A few weeks ago, in March 1993, she passed away on the eve of the Feast of Fastbreaking, three days after I had kissed her frail hands for the last time.⁹

⁸ Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Witri, *Rawdat al-nazirin*, in *Teachings of Sufism*, p. 191.

⁹ Annemarie Schimmel, “A Life of Learning,” Charles Homer Haskins Lecture for 1993, American Council of Learned Societies, Occasional Paper No. 21 (available online at

From this deeply personal tribute, we can see the powerful effect that this Turkish teacher had on her German friend, who herself became an outstanding authority on Islamic art and spirituality. It is no accident that their relationship centered on the appreciation of beauty, and that both women became exemplary teachers. May we all be fortunate enough to know such outstanding individuals.

<http://www.acls.org/op21.htm>). See also Schimmel's article "Samiha Ayverdi - Eine istanbuler Schriftstellerin," in *Der Orient in der Forschung: Festschrift für Otto Spies zum 5. April 1966*, ed. Wilhelm Hoenerbach (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1967), pp. 569-585. Professor Schimmel dedicated to Samiha Ayverdi her book *My Soul Is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam*, trans. Susan H. Ray (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003).

It's Not Just Academic!

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Carl W. Ernst

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