

The Sophianic Feminine in the Work of Ibn 'Arabi and Rumi

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In their separate and often very different ways the three great religions which make up what is sometimes called the Abrahamic tradition manifest, despite their radically patriarchal character, interesting strands and undercurrents of feminine imagery and symbolism, this being particularly the case in the exposition and expression of their more esoteric aspects. In Judaism one may note the curious matrilineal transmission of religious identity and the quasi-sacerdotal role of the mother at the Sabbath eve meal. In the case of Catholic and Orthodox Christianity one hardly needs to mention the profoundly pervasive cult of Our Lady, perhaps the most powerful manifestation of non-Judaic, pagan influences in that religious tradition. In Islam, especially in Shi'ite Islam a very interestingly similar and parallel phenomenon is evident in the various forms of the veneration of the Lady Fāṭima; but more of that later.

Apart from such often rather restricted and secondary manifestations, it is, I think well understood that the power, status, image and experience of women, whether as a social, political, religious or spiritual being has always been problematic and not a little threatening to the ruling authorities of the patriarchal religious cultures and societies, whether Abrahamic or otherwise, oscillating as they have tended to do, between the need to strictly control female mate-selection and sexual expression on the one hand, and the lauding and veneration of patriarchally positive and ideal women on the other. Indeed, even in those religious traditions of Indo-European character in which a female spiritual figure is more overtly admitted, the more sensual aspects of the feminine are no less strictly controlled and largely disdained, since all the patriarchal religions are ultimately world-denying and sense-depreciating.

Thus, even for Christians, most of whom believe profoundly in the sanctity of substance and image, there remains a deep hostility to the sensual, and particularly, to the erotic implications and associations of the Feminine. In certain ways this is even more the case with Judaism and Islam in which the notions of the sacred image and body are also banned. Although all such matters formally come under the purview of the Sacred Law in both faiths, the sensual and the sexual have in practice become secularized or—perhaps more accurately—de-sacralised. In Sunni Islam especially, apart from Sufism, this lack of any spiritual sense of the Feminine is most marked. Thus, I think one might say without too much fear of contradiction, that the Feminine, all in all, presents for these traditions a perennial problem and enigma.

Therefore, it is something of a relief and surprise to find the mystical literature of at least two of these religions, especially the mystical poetry, teeming with rich, warm images and metaphors of love and beauty, wine and ecstasy, passions, feelings and lovely female spirituals. How is one to account for this phenomenon? Why this unexpected release of feelings and experiences apparently so out of tune with the exoteric mainstream of religious orthodoxy, which indeed often strongly disapproved and disapproves of such licence.

The answer to these questions lies, I would suggest, in the nature of the mystical experience and its expression. Conveniently, one can speak of two apparently opposite kinds of mystical aspiration: one being the aspiration to merge and unite with the great vital currents and forces of cosmic nature, which R.C. Zaehner has called "nature mysticism," the other aspiring to identity and fusion with purely spiritual realities in a headlong flight from the world of nature.¹ However, transcending or perhaps deeply underlying these two opposing drives, there is an experience of an inexpressible and indescribable wholeness of being, which is common to both aspirations. It is interesting that the two opposing types of mysticism often employ the images and vocabulary of the other which suggests the polarity rather than the simple opposition of the two, since both are motivated by a powerful desire to know, love and ultimately, be united and whole, and both reject the uneasy compromise and *modus vivendi* between heaven and earth which is the experience of the ordinary believer. Thus, for the mystic, however unofficially or perhaps unconsciously, there is a deep-seated aspiration to fundamental human reconciliation, to linking and harmony, to wholeness and *coincidentia*. Above all, the mystic strives to establish a real and binding relationship—whether of love, knowledge or both—between himself and the divine object of his Quest. It is precisely within the context of this relationship-oriented quest that feminine images and symbols seem to play so natural a part, due in large part to that Sophianic nature of the spiritual/divine Feminine, the main theme of this essay, to which I shall return shortly.

Of special importance with regard to the mediating principle of this ardently desired divine-human relationship is that psycho-spiritual medium of which that great interpreter of Islamic esoterism, Henry Corbin, was so devoted and brilliant an exponent: the *‘Ālam al-mithāl* or 'intermediary realm of Idea-Images.'² It is probably precisely because of this basically unitive nature of the mystical quest that it has, as Rudolf Otto has shown, despite some more exaggerated claims, a greater universal relevance and significance, especially because it has restored in a profound and principal way the place of the Feminine in the scheme of things, both sensual and spiritual.

At this point it is appropriate that I address myself to an examination of the particular term 'Sophianic Feminine' employed in my title, a term first coined, I believe, by Henry Corbin. Its primary meaning, of course, relates to the notion of the Feminine as a manifestation of divine Wisdom or 'Sophia' who makes an early appearance in the Old Testament, both in *Ecclesiastes* and in the *Apocrypha*'s book of *Ecclesiasticus* in which she describes her close association with the Most High

1. *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* (Oxford 1961), Ch. III.

2. *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (London 1969), Ch. IV.

God, dwelling with him for ever.¹ Within Judaism this Sophia or Wisdom-figure develops along very interesting lines, especially in the notion of the *Shekhinah*, as studied by R. Patai in his thought-provoking book on the *Hebrew Goddess*.²

Two short quotations from *Ecclesiasticus* will suffice to show the two main characteristics which are associated with the Sophianic image wherever she is manifest. Her first, perhaps most important characteristic, is creative and noetic, symbolizing the creative act of the divine Word and the infinite content of divine Knowledge which is its eternal resource. Thus, it is said of her that she is "...the Word which was spoken by the Most High," and that "No man has ever fully known Wisdom; from first to last no one has fathomed her; for her thoughts are vaster than the ocean and her purpose deeper than the great abyss."³ Her other main characteristic is an overwhelming beauty which commands love and desire. After a long and fine description of herself as being like roses, cypresses and palm trees, she says, "Come to me, you who desire me and eat your fill of my fruit. The memory of me is sweeter than syrup, the possession of me sweeter than honey."⁴ Thus, here in one of the earliest expositions of her symbolic and spiritual presence within patriarchal scripture, she already unites in her image the two main modes of mystical experience and aspiration, namely Love and Gnosis.

What is important to realize concerning this figure is that she is active, creative and enabling. This aspect of her function is clearly present in the root of the word *Sophia* which basically means 'to craft, to design, to be skilful,' which meanings link it very interestingly to a parallel concept and image in Hindu Tantrism, that of the feminine *Shakti*, the root of which is *shak*, 'to make, to do, to empower.' It is precisely the function of the divine *Shakti* to provide the divine Subject/Person with the inspiration for and the content of his creative Self-knowing and revelation, the function of which is clearly illustrated in the above quotations. Thus, in *aeternis* the Sophianic Feminine is the essential instigator of that primordial division of the divine Being into the creative relationship of Subject and Object, of own/Self and other/non-Self, whether in terms of God's discovery of his infinite possibilities in the created Cosmos, or in terms of its discovery of his Selfhood in the Spirit. Thus God must make Himself other in order to relate to Himself, to know Himself, to love Himself, but also to be none other, to be Himself. In this tension of divine self-relationship and non-relationship it is the divine Sophia which is the very trigger and dynamic of that relationship, as also the whole of what can be known and loved as that 'other' required by the experience of relationship.

Thus beauty in this context may be understood as that eternally and fatefully fascinating combination of 'otherness' and 'ownness': that 'other' which is mysteriously familiar and akin to one, and that which is one's own but which is also elusively another. It is then that the divine Beauty stirs the divine creative force to will the becoming of the cosmos, and also to stir the cosmos through man to rediscover the divine Selfhood. In other words, the Sophianic Feminine is the mistress

1. *New English Bible* (Oxford 1970), Ch. XXIV.

2. (Avon, 1978).

3. Ch. XXIV, v. 3, vv. 28-29.

4. *Ibid.* vv. 19-20.

who presides over all the possible tensions and harmonies of the principle of relationship itself whether manifest within the divine, human or cosmic contexts, which mystery is very much reflected in Mary's title of *theotokos* or God-bearer, and in the very similar title ascribed by certain traditions to Fāṭima in Islam of *umm abihā*.

This last observation leads conveniently to my next point, which is that this Sophianic figure is not only a concept, allegory or spiritual image, but, very importantly, more often than not, is manifested in varying degrees and ways in actual human females whose persons and physical forms became, so to speak, carriers and bearers of the spiritual archetype, or as the Irish poet John Montague put it rather more negatively, "bearing the mythic burden."¹

Two main kinds of Sophianic manifestation may be discerned. The first is of the kind alluded to in speaking of Mary and Fāṭima: the situation in which a profound collective aspiration and a mysterious aptitude and receptivity combine to create a particular manifestation of the archetype with extensive mythical and cultural implications. The second type is the situation in which a particular woman or girl evokes in a man an especially powerful vision of the creative beauty which leaves him and his life changed and which may occasion new creative forces, whether intellectual or physical. In the case of both these types the human bearers of the revelation of Sophianic Beauty and Wisdom certainly have powerful enabling and creative effects. In the case of Mary, one only has to consider the literature, architecture and music she has inspired down the centuries in many lands in Christendom. In Europe, at any rate, perhaps the most influential lady of the second type was the lovely Beatrice who so transformed that towering figure of our culture, Dante Alighieri. The effect of such a Sophianic vision and revelation in the case of Dante has been succinctly and accurately described by William Anderson in his book, *Dante, The Maker*:

Through his love of her on Earth he formed an indissoluble union of love with her that transcended the incident of her death... he found that the only way to the sight of God was through her as the revelation of his soul... so she, as his illuminated soul represents the search for unity and contains in herself the still causes of history and of creation. Through love of her his love expands to become the love of God... she is in him the gateway to ecstatic joy, the source both of his inspiration and his salvation, the maker of him as a torch of living flame... through her guidance he achieved a total transformation in his emotional and intellectual being.²

Some have been tempted to suppose that Beatrice was not really a woman of flesh and blood, but rather some ethereal abstraction of an overheated imagination, some spiritual or intellectual device employed by the poet on his inner quest. Such suppositions completely miss the point of the phenomenon here being explored. The divine transforming alchemy, which is the mission of the Sophianic presence, requires the proper and full relating of the two poles of spirit and flesh, so that the living flesh and form of the lady are transformed by the spirit and the spirit is substantiated by the living flesh. Here, once again, we have a further insight into the meaning of the above-mentioned title of the Virgin's title of 'God-bearer' illustrat-

1. *Selected Poems* (Oxford 1982), p.89.

2. (London 1980), p.416.

ing the significance of the usually denigrated flesh and its role in the divine-human equation. As we shall see later, this essential role for the material and the formal in the mystical contemplation of the divine being is something which both Ibn 'Arabi and Rumi lay some stress upon in their writings. In this connection it is interesting to note that all three Abrahamic religions, while wary and disparaging of the flesh and matter from the patriarchal standpoint, nevertheless believe strongly in its redeemability.

Before proceeding to discuss the ways in which our two masters have experienced and expressed the Sophianic Feminine, it might be of interest to explore briefly the way in which it has been, in various guises, manifest in the life and consciousness of Islam from the very beginning, especially in Shi'ite Islam. First of all, Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is such an important figure in Christianity has also a rather special place in the Koran, the scripture of Islam: not only having a chapter named after her and partly devoted to her story, but also being described as having been chosen by God above all other women in the worlds, as being specially devoted to the worship of God and as being—together with her son—a “sign to the worlds.”¹ One might also recall that some traditions record that the Prophet Muḥammad commanded the painted image of Mary and Jesus to be spared when he cleared the Ka'ba of idols.² Mary is, of course, interestingly associated with the function and symbolism of the *mihrāb* through her connection with Zakariya³ and many *mihrābs* have this verse inscribed upon them.

Another early support for the notion of the special nature of woman in Islam, although later much overlaid by rather more negative and hostile sentiments, is the well-attested love and respect of the Prophet himself for women in general, and for certain women in particular. One thinks, of course, of his devotion to Khadija and their daughter Fāṭima, the last of whom was to acquire later, especially among Shi'ite Muslims, a status and role very similar to that of Mary in Christendom. She would be called ‘the Virgin’, ‘Mother of her father’ and the ‘Lady of Sorrows’.⁴ Indeed, the development of her cult of veneration not only came to resemble that of Mary but also to have very interesting contacts with it, as Massignon has shown in some very interesting articles.⁵ Perhaps the most curious of these contacts is the more recent association of the Marian cult with the name of Fāṭima in the shrine of Our Lady of Fāṭima in Portugal, an association outwardly accidental and fortuitous, but inwardly not without providential significance. Yet another curious example of seemingly coincidental feminine symbolism in early Islam is the entrusting of the newly copied text of the Koran to the keeping of Ḥafṣah, wife of Muḥammad and daughter of the doughty 'Umar, the meaning of her name (‘the Keeper’) being appropriate to her trust: one is reminded here of the Goddess Hathor whose name means to keep and hold the sacred one.

Of course, later in the history of Sufism, women would play a rather more

1. Koran, III: 41, XXI:91.

2. *Life of Muḥammad*, trans. A. Guillaume (Oxford 1955), p.552.

3. Koran III 36

4. Massignon, L., *Opera Minora* I (Beirut 1963), p. 567ff.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 550-618.

significant role than they have done traditionally in exoteric Islam: one thinks particularly of the famous Rābī'a al-'Adawīyya. Also, as already mentioned earlier, many Sufi poets have sung the praises of the divine Beauty using images of feminine beauty. One may say therefore, that although the dimension of the Feminine is less overt and more inward in Islam than in Christianity and Judaism, it is by no means lacking. Its earlier manifestations just discussed have, I am sure, provided inspiration and support for the often dramatic enunciation of the experience and vision of the Sophianic Feminine in the Shaykh of Murcia and the Mystical lover of Konya. They, in their turn, undoubtedly inspired and promoted her influence and genius wherever the Sufis gather to express their love of God.

It is now time to consider how the subject of our essay, the Sophianic Feminine, features and functions in the experience and work of two of the greatest exponents of Sufi teaching: Ibn 'Arabī and Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi. Comparison of these two masters of the spiritual path is usually rather difficult, insofar as their mode of expression and exposition could hardly be more different. Ibn 'Arabī, on the one hand, is for the most part a great prose exponent of mystical doctrine, and even in his poetry is mostly devoted to the enunciation of spiritual truths and gnostic insights. Rumi, on the other hand, has bequeathed to the world a huge and chaotic tapestry of mystical love and passion. It is therefore very appropriate that William Chittick has entitled his excellent book on Ibn 'Arabī *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, and his earlier book on Rumi *The Sufi Path of Love*.¹ It is curious then to note that it is in the writings of the Andalusian master that image of the Sophianic Feminine is most clearly and unambiguously delineated and most directly linked to the mystery of creation and revelation, while in the writings of Rumi, the Feminine as such, is far less specifically and extensively dwelt upon, although her realm of love and ecstasy pervades the experience and expression of Rumi far more fully.

In proceeding to examine our theme in the writings of the Shaykh al-Akbar one is drawn principally to study three aspects of his teaching and experience. Firstly, we must examine the Sophianic implications of the remarkable last chapter of his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* in which, in the process of offering his interpretation of the celebrated tradition of the Prophet Muḥammad on his love for women, perfume and prayer, Ibn 'Arabī presents us with some truly profound statements on the contemplative and gnostic connotations of the Feminine.² Secondly, we must consider that deeply influential meeting at Mecca between the Shaykh and the young lady whose beauty and wisdom were to inspire a fine collection of poems in the classical mode, the *Interpreter of Desires*.³ It is certainly clear that the Lady Nizām evoked in Ibn 'Arabī a new and singular awareness and vision of the divine Feminine. Lastly, it is necessary to look at certain aspects of his teachings on the creation of the cosmos and in particular his concept of the *Nafas al-raḥmān* or the 'Breath of the Merciful.'

An examination of the passages in the last chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* reveals

1. (Albany: SUNY 1989 & Albany: SUNY 1983).

2. *Ibn Al-'Arabī, the Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R.J.W. Austin (New York: Paulist Press 1980), pp. 274-278.

3. *Tarjūmān Al-Ashwāq: A collection of Mystical odes by Muhyi'ddīn ibn al-'Arabī*, trans. R.A. Nicholson, (London 1911).

that the section dealing with the significance and role of the Feminine is divided roughly into four parts.¹ In the first of these, Ibn 'Arabī discusses the way in which God created woman from Adam to form a human polarity in which Adam loves Eve as being made in his image, while Eve loves Adam as deriving her being from him. This polarity, he says, reflects the divine-human polarity in which God loves man whom He has made in His own image, while man loves God as being the source of his own being. He also speaks of the ternary of God-man-woman, thereby illustrating the 'Chain of Love,' so to speak, since, as he says, "Love arises only for that from which one has one's being."² Ibn 'Arabī goes on to describe the physical union which man has with woman as "a total annihilation in her," deriving from a desire "which pervades all his parts."³ It is for this reason, he explains, that God has ordered the major ablution after sexual intercourse so that the purification may match the totality of the consummation and "so that he might once again behold Him (God) in the one in whom he was annihilated, since it is none other than He Whom he sees in her."⁴

He then goes on to show how it can only be in woman that man may truly contemplate the Divine. He argues thus:

When man contemplates the Real in himself as being that from which woman is created he contemplates God in active mode. If, however, he contemplates God in himself without reference to woman he contemplates the Real in passive mode. In woman he may contemplate God in both passive and active roles.

He reinforces this presentation of woman as a divine icon further by saying,

Contemplation of the Reality without formal support is not possible, since God, in His Essence, is far beyond all need of the Cosmos. Since, therefore, some form of formal support is necessary, the best and most perfect kind is the contemplation of God in women.⁵

Here he also lays stress as he does elsewhere on the notion of the providential necessity of form and substance as the complementary poles of spirit.

The two final parts of this section, in which Ibn 'Arabī illustrates the highly paradoxical nature of the role and function of the Feminine as an image and symbol of divine realities, are very interesting indeed. In the third part he resorts as he often does, to some ingenious play on the meanings and origins of Arabic verbal roots, associating the word for women, *nisā'*, with the root *nas'a* meaning 'delay' or 'postponement.' By these means he seeks to show the subordinate and derivative nature of woman as the "passive creation" brought forth from man, symbolizing, as he says, the relationship of the Universal Nature to God as that on and in which He revealed cosmic forms. Man's love for woman is also related here to her inferior status as a passive being. Here the createdness and passivity of women are stressed, which view is quite in keeping with prevailing legal and social attitudes in Islam.

1. *Bezels*, pp. 274-278.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 274.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 274.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 274.

5. *Ibid.* p. 275.

In the last part, using a similarly curious linguistic device, he seeks to demonstrate that the Feminine is also—in a subtle and pervasive way—superior and prior to man. He deduces this from the fact that, according to the tradition of the Prophet which he is interpreting, the word “three” (enumerating the three things: women, perfume and prayer, which the Prophet loved) is in the feminine form, although one of the things enumerated is masculine, the convention being that the masculine gender usually predominates. Hence he interprets this saying as meaning that the Prophet subtly intended to suggest the governance of the Feminine.¹ Ibn ‘Arabī goes on to support this deduction by pointing out that the majority of words associated with origin and creation are feminine such as essence (*dhāt*) cause (‘*illah*) power (*qudrah*). Thus, he observes, the masculine noun ‘perfume’ is placed between the two feminine nouns, ‘women’ and ‘prayer,’ just as man finds himself situated between the Divine Essence (a feminine noun) and woman, originating in the first and being the origin of the other.²

Therefore, in parts three and four of the last chapter of the *Fuṣūs al-ḥikam* Ibn ‘Arabī is alluding to one of the great mysteries of the Sophianic Feminine, namely her primordial creativity and createdness united in the same being, which is the mystery of Mary as Theotokos and of Fāṭima as *umm abihā*. In any examination of this theme the divine-human paradox is an essential clue to its nature. Thus, in this section of the *Fuṣūs*, we see briefly a deep and startling analysis and exposition of various aspects of the Sophianic Feminine, its polar function, its contemplative and visionary function and, perhaps most important of all, its reconciling and linking function as between spirit and matter, God and humankind, man and cosmos.

I think we can be reasonably sure that the meditations of the Shaykh al-Akbar just discussed were inspired in no small part by his encounter, both in form and spirit, with the lovely and spiritually accomplished Lady Nizām, which encounter I have discussed more fully elsewhere.³ What is usually missed in dealing with this very important meeting of the master recently arrived from Al-Andalus and the daughter of his new friends at Mecca is the fact that his attraction to her was by no means simply spiritual and intellectual, but also physical and psychic, which is made clear by Ibn ‘Arabī himself with the words, “And were it not for those trivial souls who are every ready for scandal and are eager for malice, I would comment here also on the beauties of her body as well as her soul, which was a garden of generosity.”⁴

I raise this point in order to reiterate what I said earlier concerning a very important, but often ignored, feature of the Sophianic Feminine, namely the supreme function of hers in translating and transforming realities and images across the great divide of visible and invisible, flesh and spirit. Indeed one might say that it is a great aspiration of the *fedeli d'amore* of whatever culture and tradition—and Ibn ‘Arabī and Rumi were certainly of their ilk—to achieve the consummate balance between

1. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

3. *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society*, VII (1988), ‘The Lady Nizām - An Image of Love and Knowledge,’ pp. 35-48.

4. *Tarjumān*, p. 11.

the two poles of mystical experience. I do not mean to suggest here at all, that Ibn 'Arabī had any form of sexual relationship with Nizām, but simply that his experience of her and its later effects and fruits in his life and quest would have been very much the poorer and insubstantial without her physical actuality and his attraction to and appreciation of it as explicitly expressed. Of course, the supreme experience of Nizām is part of a lifelong sense of and sensitivity to the holiness and specialness of the Feminine by the master. It is clear that an early wife in Murcia, Maryam, was a close companion on the Way.¹ In his autobiographical sketches he speaks very highly of at least two women of Andalusia who had a profound spiritual influence upon him. Of one of them, a certain Faṭimāh, he says, "When I met her she was in her nineties... although she was so old and ate so little, I was almost ashamed to look at her face when I sat with her, it was so rosy and soft... She was indeed a mercy to the world."²

Turning to Ibn 'Arabī's teachings concerning the origins and processes of creation and becoming we will see that once again he feels and appreciates very much the feminine nature and colour of this great primordial mystery. Before creation, when the divine Reality is entirely Itself to Itself, there is no existence or becoming, only pure being; there is no otherness or number, but only pure unique oneness in an ineffable, unimaginable, undifferentiated wholeness, a merging with which is for many the supreme mystical experience. The Shaykh sees the first glimmering of the creative process expressed in the *Ḥadīth qudsī*, "I was a hidden treasure and longed to be known, so I created the Cosmos." Thus, the first intimation of the process is the longing or love of the Divine One to know Himself, to realise or enjoy Himself in His infinite possibilities. Thus also, the first division emerges from undifferentiated wholeness: that of God, the Subject, the potential Knower, and God, the Known, the Object-of-knowing.

It is interesting that the Arabic word for love (*ḥubb*) is closely connected to the word for seed. This then is the first division within God into 'own' and 'other,' the 'other' being the *sine qua non* of any relationship, whether of Knowledge, Love or anything else. A strong desire then characterizes both parts: the Knower desiring to know, and the Known, the new 'other,' to be known. It is the becoming, the coming into existence of this 'other' which precisely constitutes the creative process. The process itself has two currents, the first being the urge to create the knowable 'other,' the second to re-assert the integrity of the divine Self. This whole dual process is a huge and complex subject to which Ibn 'Arabī devotes many thousands of pages.

Suffice it to say here that he often speaks of the creative process in feminine terms, insofar as the great primordial pressure by the Knower and all the knowable latent essences to be released into existence is described by him as if it were a divine pregnancy or labour, a *karb aẓīm*, while the actual cosmic birth itself is described as being the 'Breath of the Merciful,' *Nafas ar-raḥmān*, a concept which he equates in the chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ* already considered, with the Universal Nature—represented symbolically by woman on earth.³ With his deep learning in the Arabic

1. *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* (Cairo 1329 A.H.) II, p. 278; III, p. 235.

2. *Sūfis of Andalusia*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (London 1971), p. 143.

language and the varied meanings of its vocabulary, there is no doubt but that Ibn 'Arabī was also well-aware of the strong associations of the word *Rahman* 'Mercy' with the word for womb *Rahim*, since he understands the word mercy in its divine context as being the same as the very urge to creation itself.

Of course, in the primordial relationship of the divine 'Subject/Own' with the divine 'Object/Other'—without which there is no creative relationship—the divine Object/Other is characterized by Beauty, *Jamāl* which word itself hints strongly at the comprehensiveness and totality of the infinitely knowable Object. In human terms it is precisely this objective totality and beauty which is manifested in woman as that 'other' who is also 'own,' and that 'own' who is elusively 'other;' the 'other' who points the way to 'own-ness', the 'own' who presages 'otherness'. But these are mysteries at which words ultimately fail. It has always been something of a puzzle to me that while greatly occupied in writing vast tomes on the mysteries of creation and re-creation the great mystics nevertheless are always reminding us that their experience is in truth inexpressible.

Ibn 'Arabī then, is undoubtedly one of the major exponents of the vision of the Sophianic Feminine in the world and he has expressed the great divine-human paradoxes and mysteries over which Sophia reigns, far more directly and bravely than most. It is important to realize that his particular contribution to the exposition of these mysteries lies in the fact that his teachings and meditations are based firmly in the contemplation of their manifestation in a human, living bearer of the archetype, as was also importantly the case with Dante, who probably owed not a little to the great Sufi master. In this connection we are also fortunate to have Corbin's profound, if difficult, study of this aspect of Ibn 'Arabī's work.¹

Now at last to the master dervish of Konya, Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi, known among the Sufis as Mawlānā ('Our Master'). Although this great passionate exponent of love mysticism is, in a certain sense, perhaps more directly a follower of the divine Sophia than Ibn 'Arabī, and although he was responsible for what is perhaps the most unambiguous and succinct statement on the subject of the Sophianic Feminine, in general terms he dealt less with her than the Shaykh al-Akbar. Another apparent problem in this respect is that, apart from God Himself, the supreme beloved object for Rumi was not a woman but a man, namely the enigmatic and little-known Shams al-Dīn Tabrizī. This apparent problem may be solved in two ways. Firstly, in respect to sanctifying and redeeming love and aspiration, the human gender of the beloved does not really matter, for, in the words of Rumi himself, it is "higher than female and male."² That is to say, love is ultimately beyond such distinctions and is ascribed to God in Whom both poles are fused.

Secondly, however, it is the Feminine which has traditionally and perennially been associated with the whole phenomenon of love, passion and beauty, so that one might say that, in the context of our theme, it is the feminine symbol which dominates this sphere. Thus, one might say that while the beloved Shams is acci-

3. *Bezels*, p.277.

1. *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (London 1969).

2. *The Mathnawi of Jalālū'ddīn Rūmī* ed. & trans. R.A. Nicholson, 8 vols (London 1925-40), I, v. 1975.

dentally male, the modality of the experience and the tenor of its expression is essentially associated with the Feminine. It is important to confirm here that for Rumi, as for Ibn 'Arabī, the whole matter of the experience and expression of love and passion is not simply based on theories and intellectual sentiments but also is realized in living forms. In a most interesting passage in his prose work *Fīhī mā fīhī*, Rumi observes that,

The physical form is of great importance; nothing can be done without the consociation of the form and the essence. However much you may sow a seed stripped of its pod, it will not grow. Sow it with its pod and it will become a great tree. From this point of view the body is fundamental and necessary for the realization of the divine intention.¹

One might link this very aptly with a verse from his great Mathnawī,

*No sound of clapping comes from one hand of thine without the other hand.*²

Again, the lovely lines:

*Kings lick the earth whereof the fair are made.
For God hath mingled in the dusty earth
A draught of Beauty from His choicest cup.
'Tis that, fond lover—not these lips of clay—
Thou art kissing with a hundred ecstasies,
Think, then, what must it be when undefiled!*³

Yet another aspect of the Sophianic Feminine we have touched on many times in this essay, namely the ineluctable interdependence of polar complementaries—the eternally mutual sympathy of God and man—is summed up by Rumi in his concept of *ham-dāmī*, what Corbin has termed the 'con-spiration' of heaven and earth. He expresses this rather curiously in a couple of lines, "All kings are enslaved to their slaves," and "All loved ones are the prey of their lovers."⁴ In a wider context this cosmic cooperation and mutuality is nicely expressed in the words, "When he (the holy one) weeps, heaven begins to weep, and when he moans in supplication the celestial sphere begins to cry 'O Lord.'"⁵

The essential oneness which underlies this cosmos of sympathies and interdependencies is well expressed by Rumi in some lines about Mary, when she draws back from the fecundating angel. He says to her, "Thou art taking refuge with God from me: I am in eternity the image of Him Who is the only refuge."⁶ Also, "Thou takest refuge from me, and I myself am that refuge."⁷ Mary also inspires other lines of his poetry in which he speaks more specifically of the Sophianic Feminine: "The speech of Jesus is derived from the spiritual beauty of Mary, the speech of Adam is a ray of the divine Breath."⁸ Here we must remember the strongly creative aspect

1. Cf. *Creative Imagination*, p. 347.

2. *Mathnawī*, III, v. 4397.

3. *Ibid.*, V, v. 372-74. Translated by R.A. Nicholson, *Rumi: Poet and Mystic* (London: George Allen & Unwin 1978) p. 45.

4. *Mathnawī*, I, vv. 1736 & 1739.

5. *Ibid.*, V, v. 491.

6. *Ibid.*, III, vv. 3779.

7. *Ibid.*, III v. 3780.

8. *Ibid.*, VI, v. 4549.

of the notion of word and speech in the Islamic context. Or again, "By the august influence of Mary's hand the withered bough may acquire the fragrance of musk and freshness and fruit."¹ In the same vein in speaking of the life-giving and restorative powers of divine love he says,

By love bitter things become sweet, by love pieces of copper become golden. By love dregs become clear, by love pains become healing. By love the dead is made living, by love the king is made a slave. This love moreover is the fruit of gnosis.²

Here, as in the first quoted lines from *Ecclesiasticus*, beauty and wisdom, love and knowledge are joined together.

Finally, I come to those lines of the *Mathnawī* which proclaim the Sophianic message perhaps more directly than any other and which certainly compare with Ibn 'Arabī's words in the *Fuṣuṣ* as an exposition of the symbolic mystery which is the theme of this essay. He says in the first book:

The Prophet said that woman prevails exceedingly over the wise and intelligent, while ignorant men prevail over women; for in them the fierceness of the animal is immanent.
Love and tenderness are human qualities, anger and lust are animal qualities.
*She is a ray of God; she is not that earthly beloved. She is creative: you might say she is not created.*³

Indeed, in some beautiful verses preceding these lines, the Persian master would seem to echo Ibn Al-Arabī in presenting us with both faces of the Sophianic Feminine: contrasting the powerful and imperial beauty of her divine and cosmic function with the more passive and apparently dependant human aspect, thus confirming not only the wholeness of the feminine image as a revelation of the divine—pre-eminently apt for holy contemplation—but also that ineluctable polarity and *ham-dāmi* of the male and female as the synthetic and perennial image of the divine Self-love and knowledge. He says:

She by whose beauteous face man was enslaved, how will it be when she begins to play the humble slave?
She at whose haughtiness thy heart is trembling, how wilt thou fare when she falls a-weeping before thee?.....
*Inasmuch as He created her (woman) that he (Adam) might take comfort in her, how can Adam be parted from Eve?*⁴

I cannot do better here than follow Rumi's words with those of Nicholson's commentary on these same lines:

Putting aside the veil of form, the poet contemplates in Woman the eternal beauty that is the inspiratrix and the object of all love, and he sees her, in her essential nature, as the medium par excellence by which this increate beauty reveals itself and exerts its creative activity. From this point of view she is the focus of all manifestations and the giver of life and can be identified with the power of their radiations.⁵

1. *Mathnawī*, IV, v. 3497.

2. *Ibid.*, II, vv. 1529-31.

3. *Ibid.*, I, vv. 2433-37. Rumi: *Poet and Mystic* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978) p.44.

4. *Mathnawī*, I, vv. 2421-2422, 2426.

5. *Ibid.*, VII, pp. 156.

It hardly needs to be said that between them, Ibn 'Arabī and Rumi bequeathed to the Muslim world as a whole—and in particular to the Sufis who followed them—an enormously rich legacy of spiritual vision and insight. Through their disciples and followers this arcane and always suspect and danger-laden image finds fresh echoes and elaborations in that wonderfully fruitful world of Hindu-Muslim mystical and spiritual cohabitation in which Sophia meets and joins with Shakti to radiate both widely and profoundly a rich afterglow of love and inspiration which has provided so much fine Indo-Sufi hymnody up to our own times. An important by-product of this paradoxical re-emergence of the feminine mode in Sufi song and poetry is a greater sensitivity on the part of many of the great Sufi exponents of Divine love to the experience of the world of nature and the senses, albeit refined by spiritual exercises. Thus, through the medium of the 'intermediate world' of spiritual imagination, flesh and spirit are reconciled, a reconciliation often presided over by the shimmering figure of a Lady Nizām.

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