



On The Transcendence of the Letter *alif*

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*Letter alif alone is enough for me; set aside your
sophistic ramblings. alif has captivated my heart.*

Khawaja Ghulam Farid

The following is an English translation-commentary of a chapter from an Urdu work by a great Indian Sufi of the Nineteenth century, Shah Wahhaj al-Din Qalandar of Kakori. The Shah actually wrote a commentary on *al-Khaf war Raqim* (The Cave and the Mountain)¹, a difficult Arabic treatise concerning the exposition of the *basmalah*, written by another great Sufi of the Fourteenth century, Shaykh Abd-al-Karim Jili. In the treatise the author has expounded, in a masterly fashion the doctrine of Non-duality from the stand point of the science of letters.

Know that in the Arabic alphabet the first letter *alif* is masculine while the letter *ba* having a *nuqta* (dot) under it is feminine². The *alif* corresponds to the *qalam* (the supreme Pen) and the *nuqta* is equivalent to the divine Inkpot. The Koran refers to the above correspondences by employing the expression: *nun*³ *wal qalam*.

The divine Ink (*midah*), as a matter of fact, is contained in the Inkpot which is to say that the *maddah* (substance) is contained in the *nuqta*. The *midah* or the *maddah* is a plastic substance which is used by the Pen or the *alif* in 'moulding' (composing) the letters or beings like a potter. The letters necessarily proceed from the Ink by the agency of the Pen.

¹ In this Koranic expression the Cave signifies the feminine principle-*Shakti* while the Mountain implies the masculine principle- *Shiva*, the dweller or the embodiment of Mount *kailasha*. Let us note a correspondence between the *nuqta* and the *alif* or the *ahadiyyah* and the *ahad*, which will be considered later.

² In what follows, the letter *ba* will be called the *nuqta* (dot) because the whole of the *ba* is contained in the dot below the *ba*.

³ The-letter *nun* is equivalent to both the Inkpot and the Ink-the container and its content. The shape of the *nun* is like a pot or a cup. The *nun* also carries a dot which is its content; the *nun* is also the Guarded Tablet (*lawh mahfuz*).

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Although the Pen have a relationship of 'witness' (*maiyyah*) with the Ink and its products- the letters, yet the Pen does not have a bond of 'attachment' with them as it tends to keep itself aloof so to say, from its production. Strictly speaking, the Pen never ceases separating itself during the very process of composing letters. In course of and after the production the detachment (*tafarrud*) of the Pen with the letters remains the same. This detachment of the Pen is not unlike the 'disjoining' of a husband from his wife after the conjugal act⁴. Therefore, the relation between the Pen or the *alif* and the Ink or the *nuqta* is one of married couples. In other words, the *nuqta* is, as it were the wife of the *alif*.

In being analogous to the seed *nutfa*, the *nuqta* is, by all means the seed of the *alif* or the Pen; nevertheless, the *alif* remains eternally transcendent to the concomitants (*awaiq*) of the *nuqta* which are responsible for universal manifestation. The same relation holds true between the real (*haq*) and the existents of the world. Although this relationship is, sometimes, characterized by immanence (*tashbih*) in the Koran- *He is with you wherever you are; wherever you turn, there is the face of God; He encompasses everything; In yourselves-what, do you not see?* Yet transcendence (*tanzih*) is also affirmed in the following manner-*God is independent of the worlds*. Taking this verse his point of departure, the author, Abd al-Karim Jili, by declaring the transcendence of the *alif* to the *nuqta*, calls attention to the mystery of creation, meaning thereby the creation cannot occur without immanence yet the creator does not cease to be transcendent throughout the process of creation.

The *nuqta* which is none other than the *ahadiyya* (Unity) unmanifested in itself and which is called the Golden Embryo (*hiranyagarbha*) among the Hindus, is pregnant with the manifestable beings (creatures).

We have already alluded to the ontological priority (transcendence) of the *alif* to the *nuqta* but here we may also note that the *alif* is essentially prior (*taqaddum dhati*) to the divine Names (*asma*).

Just as all creation occurs through the medium of woman (the feminine principle) in the domain of human manifestation, so from a universal point of view, all the possibilities of manifestation (*mazahir*) follow from the *ahadiyyah* as Substance by the agency of the *ahad* as Essence⁵.

In the light of the Koranic Verse *They are a clothing for you and you are a clothing for them*, that is, the wives (maternal and passive principle) are a clothing for their husband (paternal and active principle) and the husband is a clothing for his wives⁶, the *ahadiyyah* or the *nuqta* can be identified with the 'Mother of the Book' (*umm al-kitab*) while the *ahad* or the axial *alif* because of its transcendent character is the 'Lord of the Kingdom'

⁴ As a result, the womb of a woman is inseminated by the man's sperm-drop, that is, the seed (*nutfa*). There is an analogy between the sperm-drop and the dot of the *ba*.

⁵ Here the pair *ahad-ahadiyyah* is analogous to the Hindu couple *shiva-shakti*.

⁶ It is not without interest to note the plurality of wives with the singularity of husband, that is, the multiplicity of manifestation with the unity of the Principle.

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(*malik al-mulk*). It is also to be added here that the *alif* or the *ahad* being none other than the real (*haq*), is both the phenomenal reality (*mazhar*) as well as its Principle (*haq*)⁷.

From the point of view of manifestations the *nuqta* can be seen as a scale (*mizan*)⁸ of the *alif*, that is, the essence (*dhat*) of the *alif* is measured by the scale of the *nuqta*. So, the divine Names and Attributes (*asma wa sifat*) enter into manifestation not without being determined by the scale of the *nuqta* or the *ahadiyyah*. In this sense, the *nuqta* is, so to speak, the determinant (*mizan*) of the *alif* and the *alif* the determined. But from the vantage point of the Principle, the *alif* is not only both the First (*awwal*) and the Last (*akhir*) but also the Essence (*dhat*) of the *nuqta*.

As far as the correlation between the *alif* and the *nuqta* is concerned, the existence of the former is not without the existence of the latter and vice versa.

The *alif* remains unmanifest yet it enters into manifestation in the form (*surah*) of the *nuqta* but not without being conditioned by it. From a certain point of view, the *alif* in its aspect of lastness (*akhir*) can be seen to be composed of a plurality of *nuqtas* and the *nuqta* in being a constituent part of the *alif* have a plurality of bodies (*jasad mutaddidah*) embodying a single spirit (*ruh wahid*)⁹. The *nuqta*, let us repeat, like the spirit (*ruh*) is feminine while the *alif* is masculine.

The creation of Eve can be envisaged in the light of the *alif-nuqta* relationship. Eve was created from the left side of Adam's bosom, that is, Eve was originated from Adam. In this sense, Eve is the soul or essence (*nafs*) of Adam and conversely Adam is the soul or essence of Eve which is to say that the *nuqta* is the essence of the *alif* and the *alif* is the essence of the *nuqta*. As the essence (*dhat*) of a being is superior to its qualities (*sifat*), so, Eve being the essence of Adam is to be considered superior to the latter. But we also know that Adam is the essence of Eve, moreover, the cosmic determination of the former is prior and superior to the latter. Therefore, Adam is superior to Eve. For this reason the Koran declares: *Men enjoy a rank above them*.

If the *nuqta* is looked upon as the essence of the *alif*, correspondingly, Adam-Eve (the Androgyne) holds the same relation in respect of God. At this juncture, the essential unity between the Androgyne and God or the *nuqta* and the *alif* becomes quite evident. It can be added further that God runs through (*saryan*) all the beings or at another level, Universal Man, particularly the Prophet Mohammad runs through all the creatures¹⁰.

⁷ In the School of *trika darshana* based on *shaivagama*, popularly known as Kashmir Shaivism, the first sanskrit letter *a*, equivalent to the letter *alif* pervades all the other letters of the alphabet (phenomenal reality).

⁸ *Mizan* is a measuring device or a mode of measurement.

⁹ The Koran Says: He blew into him of His spirit.

¹⁰ The numerical values of *allah*, *adam* and *hawwa* are 67, 46 and 21 respectively. By adding the last numbers we get the number 67, which is equal to that of *allah*. Thus, there is a numerical identity between *adam-hawwa* (the Androgyne) and *allah*. Moreover, the numerical value of Adam is greater than that of Eve which proves Adam's superiority.

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In the Hierarchy of beings the *haq* is superior to the *ruh* and likewise the *ahad* to the *ahadiyya*; the *alif* to the *nuqta*; the *qalam* to *nun*; the Universal Intellect (*aql kull*) to the Universal Soul (*nafs kull*); the Universal Nature (*Tabiat al-kull*) to the Materia Prima (*haba*)¹¹; and finally man to woman.

In this sense, woman is to be considered a part of man but the *nuqta*, her analogous counterpart, being indivisible, implies woman's indivisibility too. In other words, the part-whole relation between woman and man is not the ordinary one. While the *alif* is, needless to say, integral (*jami*); the *nuqta* is, so to speak a 'part' of the *alif* without in any way losing its integrality. Now because the comprehensiveness (*Jamiyyah*) of the *alif* is manifested by the *nuqta*, therefore the latter cannot but be considered an essential attribute (*sifah dhati*) of the former. At this level, to speak of the equality between the *nuqta* and the *alif* notwithstanding the latter's ontological priority over the former, is perfectly valid. Also the names and attributes of the *nuqta* are but the names and attributes of the *alif*.

Just as the unity of the *alif* cannot be negated by multiplicity, so the unicity of universal Man also cannot be negated.

Drawing a further comparison as to the analogical relationship between the *alif* and Universal Man, this much we can say:

Just as the *alif* cannot be counted among the set of alphabetical letters, so Universal Man cannot be regarded as belonging to the class of creatures for both have a transcendent character.

The exposition we have made above is not without its practical consequences. By following the Prophetic precept, "Die, before you die", that is, by treading the initiatic path, the traveller will, by degrees, be able to go beyond his individuality, thus overcoming the illusory and relative distinction (*farq idafi*) between the Real (*haq*) and him which is nothing but the realization of Supreme Identity.

¹¹ The term *tabiat al-Kull* may be compared to the Hindu *maya* and the *haba* to its lower aspect *prakriti*.