



Islam and the Divine Feminine

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So often has Islam been portrayed as an exclusively masculine, patriarchal faith that many have never suspected the central importance of the Feminine in Islam and would be astonished to realize that it has been there from the beginning. Perhaps in part due to the metaphysical interiority of the Feminine, this aspect of Islam has lived a largely hidden existence — but it is no less vital for that. In recent years there has been much discussion and controversy over how to reshape Christianity to include the Feminine on the divine level, but in Islam that has never been an issue, for the feminine element in Islam has always been present, especially in Sufism.

Although both masculine and feminine equally have their origin in the Divine, I would like to take a special look at the feminine in Islam to help redress the balance because the feminine side of Islam has been mostly overlooked so far. Moreover, in the sources of Islam and in the Sufi tradition growing from there, we find a distinct, explicit preference for the feminine aspect of Allah, especially the nature of ultimate Divine Reality as essentially feminine.

The Polarity of Divine Majesty and Beauty

The distinction between male and female is not just a biological accident but a very profound element of the human state. It goes back from the biological through the psychological and the spiritual to the Divine Reality itself. On the highest level of the Divine Reality, Allah is perfectly One. The root of the duality between the masculine and feminine is found in the divine nature itself. Allah's Essence transcends all duality, all relationality, so it is beyond male or female. But even on the level of the Divine Nature, there are the roots of the masculine and the feminine. On the highest level, Allah is at once Absolute and Infinite. These two attributes are the supreme archetypes of the masculine and the feminine. "Masculine" and "feminine" are not simply equivalents of the human male and female, since all men and women have elements of both masculinity and femininity within them. That Allah is Absolute is the principle of masculinity, and that Allah is Infinite is the principle of femininity. Allah has revealed Himself in the Qur'ân in the names of rigor and mercy, known as the names of Majesty (*jalâl*) and Beauty (*jamâl*). The Generous, the Merciful, the Forgiving are names of mercy or Beauty, while the Enumerator and the Just are names of rigor or Majesty. On the level of

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the names are the principles of the masculine and the feminine: the names of Majesty are the prototype of masculinity, while the names of Beauty are the prototype of femininity. Vis-à-vis the world, Allah is Creator. This divine function is on the masculine side, representing the aspects of action, force, movement, rigor; Allah as Lawgiver. But then there is the *uncreating* aspect of Allah. Allah is not exhausted by His creation of the world. Allah is more than the creator of the world: *al-Khâliq*, the Creator, is only one of the divine names. The Divine Reality did not completely participate in the act of creation. Allah is Infinite and the world is finite. The non-creating aspect of Allah corresponds to the Divine Femininity. It is this to which Sufi poetry so often refers in the feminine. The images of the beautiful Beloved are referring to the metacosmic aspect of the Divine, not the creating aspect.

That is why Ibn al-‘Arabî says Allah can be referred to as both *huwa* (He) and *hiya* (She).

Feminine Terms of Divinity

Some of the key terms associated with the Divine are in the feminine gender in Arabic. Three of them are essential to understand the feminine dimension in Islam. One of Allah's names is *al-Hakîm*, the Wise; Wisdom is *hikmah*. In Arabic to say, for example, "Wisdom is precious," you could repeat the feminine pronoun: *al-hikmah hiya thamînah*, literally "Wisdom, she is precious." This has resonance with the forgotten Christian mystical tradition, in which Wisdom is personified as a woman, the divine Sophia, associated with the Virgin Mary. The second term is *rahmah* (mercy), related to the most important name of God after *Allâh*: *al-Rahmân*, the All-Merciful, related to the word for 'womb', *rahim*, the source of life. The source of life is the Divine Mercy and the feminine aspect of it is very evident. The third, the most remarkable of all, is the word for the Divine Essence itself: *al-Dhât*, which is also feminine. In that the Divine Essence is Beyond-Being, unmanifest and transcending all qualities, it may be understood as Feminine. The renowned Sufi master Najm al-Din Kubra wrote of the *Dhât* as the "Mother of the divine attributes." According to a commentary on Ibn al-‘Arabî's *Fusûs al-hikam*, a hadith of Prophet Muhammad "gave priority to the true femininity that belongs to the Essence." Ibn al-‘Arabî himself wrote that "I sometimes employ the feminine pronoun in addressing Allah, keeping in view the Essence."

On this metaphysical plane, femininity corresponds to interiority and masculinity to manifestation. In the traditional Islamic city, beauty is interiorized. All human beings contain both elements within themselves, in their souls and bodies and psyches. The perfection of the human state, *al-insân al-kâmil*, means the perfection of both masculine and feminine qualities together, the prototype of both male and female. In Sufism, men and women perform exactly the same rites and worship, so the perfection of human spirituality is equally accessible to men and women—unlike in Theravada Buddhism, in which a woman must be reborn as a man to attain nirvana.

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Female Imagery of the Divine Beloved in Sufi Poetry

Sufi literature has the greatest discussion of femininity in Islam. Sufi stories have transformed ordinary love stories into the most sublime levels of meaning. The love story of Layla and Majnun is the best-known of all. It originated as a simple love story in Arabia, but Sufi literature elaborated it into the most beautiful love story ever put into Persian poetry. It symbolizes not only the love of man and woman in Allah, but the love of man for Allah. In these poems the heroine is elevated to symbolize the Divine Reality itself. The Divine Reality is spoken of in terms of female beauty. The hero goes in quest of the Divine, which is a masculine act. In contrast to Christian mysticism, in which God is actively masculine and the devotee is passively feminine, Sufi love stories depict the Beloved as a woman who is a Presence waiting in stillness while the hero is in quest for her.

The name *Laylā* comes from the word *layl* meaning 'night'. Night represents the Unmanifest. In the Arabian desert, the night is a reality without boundaries: forms are dissolved, no sand dunes or camels or anything else visible, all is formless, nothing but darkness. This is direct symbolism of the unmanifested aspect of the Divine Nature, Allah as Unmanifest. Blackness absorbs all light, as it is above manifestation, so it symbolizes the Beyond-Being. In the poem, Layla was named for the blackness of her hair and the beauty of the night. By extension, it in fact refers to the beauty of the Divine Reality beyond this world, beyond the act of creation, and therefore the supreme goal that the Sufi seeks to reach. The name of Majnûn literally means 'crazy', but here it means someone not in an ordinary state of mind, symbolizing a person in quest of Allah. In this world in which most people forget Allah, the person who remembers Him is considered crazy. As the male figure, Majnûn symbolizes the aspect of yearning and striving, going out in quest of Layla, while she is just sitting and combing her hair. The one who undertakes the journey, longing and crying for Layla, is the soul of the Sufi.

Allah as the Beloved in Sufi literature, the *ma'shûq*, is always depicted with female iconography. Although Islam is aniconic and does not make images of Allah, verbal depiction exists. Sufi literature is replete with this imagery of our experience of Allah as the vision of the Beloved and union with the Beloved. An elaborate vocabulary developed in which every part of a woman's body, especially the face, symbolizes the Divine Reality. For example, the eyebrows are likened to a bow that shoots the arrow of the eye's glance, the arrow of the love of Allah into our hearts and makes us go beyond ourselves. Like the eyes of veiled women in traditional Islamic culture, where all you can see are their beautiful dark eyes: their whole vocabulary of love has to be expressed through a single glance. The ruby-red lips with their red color symbolize wine. Wine is used in Sufi literature to symbolize going beyond our ordinary consciousness into union with the Divine. Although wine is forbidden in Islamic law, there will be pure wine to drink in Paradise. Since Sufis experience Paradise here in this world by having inner experience of the higher levels of reality, the wine of Paradise is accessible symbolically through Sufism. Here, the redness of this wine is conjoined with the color of a woman's lips. At the same time, the kiss of the lips is an erotic symbol of union and intimacy.

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For example, Rumi said in the *Masnavi*:

*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 thousand ecstasies,
Think, then, what it must be when undefiled!*

The Vision of God in Woman

There was a question long debated in Islam: can we see Allah? The Prophet said in a hadith: "In Paradise the faithful will see Allah with the clarity with which you see the moon on the fourteenth night (the full moon)." Theologians debated what this could mean, but the Sufis have held that you can see Allah even in this world, through the "eye of the heart." al-Hallaj said in a poem: "*ra'aytu rabbi bi-'ayni qalbi*" (I saw my Lord with the eye of my heart). The Sufis said that since you can have the experience of Paradise even in this world, you can have the vision (*ru'yah*) of Allah. They have always described this theophanic experience as the vision of a woman, the female figure as the object of *ru'yah*.

The *Tarjumân al-ashwâq*, Ibn al-'Arabî's collection of love poems composed after meeting the learned and beautiful Persian woman Nizam in Mecca, is filled with images pointing to the Divine Feminine. The last chapter in his book *Fusûs al-hikam* relates that man's supreme witnessing of Allah is in the form of the woman during the act of sexual union. The contemplation of Allah in woman is the highest form of contemplation possible:

As the Divine Reality is inaccessible in respect of the Essence, and there is contemplation only in a substance, the contemplation of God in women is the most intense and the most perfect; and the union which is the most intense (in the sensible order, which serves as support for this contemplation) is the conjugal act.

Allah as Mother

In contrast to Christianity, Islam has never depicted God as Father. Such a comparison is completely outside the boundaries of Islamic discourse. However, Muslims have always found it easy and natural to speak of the maternal qualities of Allah.

Prophet Muhammad was the first to use the example of mothers to illustrate Allah's mercy. After a battle, the Prophet and his Companions came upon a group of women and children. One woman had lost her child and was going around looking for him, her breasts flowing with milk. When she found her child, she joyfully put him to her breast and nursed him. The Prophet asked his Companions, "Do you think that this woman could throw her son in the fire?" They answered "No." He then said: "Allah is more

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merciful to His servants than this woman to her son." (From the hadith collection of al-Bukhari).

Another al-Bukhari hadith describes how during the Muslim conquest of Mecca a woman was running about in the hot sun, searching for her child. She found him, and clutched him to her breast, saying, "My son, my son!" The Prophet's Companions saw this, and wept. The Prophet was delighted to see their mercy, and said, "Do you wonder at this woman's mercy (*rahmah*) for her child? By Him in Whose hand is my soul, on the Day of Judgment, Allah shall show more *rahmah* toward His believing servant than this woman has shown to her son."

Jalal al-Din Rumi, in an amazing passage of the *Masnavi* on the Return to Allah, made reference to the story of the infant Moses and addressed Allah directly as "Mother":

*On Resurrection Day, the sun and moon are released from service:
and the eye beholds the Source of their radiance,
then it discerns the permanent possession from the loan,
and this passing caravan from the abiding home.
If for a while a wet nurse is needed,
Mother, return us to your breast.
I don't want a nurse; my Mother is more fair.
I am like Moses whose nurse and Mother were the same.
(Masnavi, V:701)*

The Ka'bah in Mecca, the very heart and pivot of the Islamic world, naturally is associated with feminine imagery, veiled in the black color of the Feminine Beyond-Being. Medieval writers and poets have often compared the holiest shrine of Islam to a veiled bride or a desired virgin, especially when on the pilgrimage. Their goal was to touch and kiss her beauty mark, the black stone. Khaqani was the Persian poet who most frequently employed this symbolism in his pilgrim poems. But another look at the Ka'bah can come from the root of its name in the Arabic language. Although the word *ka'bah* itself means 'cube', it is very close to the word *ku'b* meaning 'woman's breast'. This turns out to be an appropriate metaphor, as indeed the Ka'bah nurtures with the milk of spiritual blessing all the faithful who come to touch and kiss it. Consider also the eminently feminine Yoni form of the Black Stone's setting.

The Prophet's Feminine Soul

Prophet Muhammad's soul had a deeply feminine nature within. When his Companions asked him whom he loved most in the whole world, he answered it was his wife, 'Â'ishah. They were surprised to hear him announce love for a woman, as this was a new concept to them; they had been thinking in terms of the manly camaraderie between warriors. So they asked him which man he loved most. He answered Abû Bakr, 'Â'ishah's father, a gentleman who was known for his sensitive personality. These answers confounded the Companions who until then had been brought up on patriarchal values. The Prophet was introducing reverence for the Feminine to them for the first time.

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Surah 109 in the Qur'ân, *al-Kawthar*, gives an especially revealing look into the Prophet's feminine soul. It was revealed because his enemies had been taunting him that he had no sons, only daughters, while they had been given sons to perpetuate their patriarchal ways. Allah revealed this message of consolation to the Prophet: "*We have given thee al-Kawthar ... surely the one who hates thee will be cut off* (from progeny)." What is *al-Kawthar*? A sacred pool of life-giving water in Paradise—a profoundly feminine symbol. It represents a heavenly exaltation of the Feminine over patriarchal society. The name of *Kawthar* is derived from the same root as *kathîr* 'abundance', a quality of the supernal Infinite, the Divine Feminine.

Woman as Creator

One of the most outright declarations of the Divine Feminine in all Sufi literature is in Rumi's *Masnavi*. In a passage praising the feminine qualities of kindness and gentleness, a passage that is increasingly well-known in these days of the resurgent Feminine, he says:

*Woman is the radiance of God, she is not your beloved.
She is the Creator—you could say that she is not created.*
(Masnavi, I:2437)

The Primacy of the Feminine in Islam

Seen from the exterior, Islam may appear as a masculine-dominated faith. That is because its external aspects, such as the sacred law that governs the social order, are a manifestation of Allah's *jalâl* attributes. The hidden side of Islam, little known to the outside world, lives and breathes the values of interiority, the loving, forgiving, merciful Divine Presence that draws hearts closer, the infinite *jamâl* aspects of Allah's Beauty. The eternal primacy of Allah's feminine nature is established in a *hadith qudsi*: "My mercy precedes My wrath" (*rahmatî sabaqat ghadabî*).

Beyond all, the infinite eternal mystery of Allah's uncreated Essence is the Divine Feminine that is the ultimate spiritual Reality, calling to the souls who love Allah to come home and find perfect peace.