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## Exaltation of Women in the Chapter on Muḥammad in Ibn 'Arabī's Fusūs al-hikam

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Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) is arguably the most influential Sufi in Islam. Of his vast oeuvre, no work has attracted more attention than Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam. In the most important chapter of this work - on Muhammad - Ibn 'Arabī writes of the true significance of women, showing the exceptionally high regard in which he holds them. Ibn 'Arabī is keen to underscore that it is the metaphysical significance of women, and not their physical form, that was made beloved to Muhammad. This was due to the complementarity of their respective essences, which are the passive receptacles of the divine creative breath. This passivity is then transformed into activity when both actively transmit the divine breath in their own creative capacities and their manifestation of the divine Names, it is this amalgamation of feminine passivity and activity – reflected in Muḥammad's own passivity and activity - that establishes an ontological connection between them. This study explores these aspects of women's metaphysical significance in the chapter on Muhammad as presented by Ibn 'Arabi and promulgated by the most prominent exegetes of the Fuṣûṣ.

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## Introduction

Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) is arguably the foremost Ṣūfi theorist in Islam and his works have exerted a powerful influence on the Muslim tradition for centuries; it is an influence that shows no signs of abating. The positive image of women in his works, his notable female influences and numerous female followers, and his lack of opposition to female imamate, amongst other contributions have been observed by other scholars.2

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<sup>1</sup>The staggering influence of Ibn 'Arabī can be seen in the numerous works dedicated to him from Western Europe to America, and from Turkey and Iran to Indonesia. A deeper engagement with his thought can be found in Abu'l-'Ala' 'Afifi, The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid'Din Ibnul-'Arabi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939); Rom Landau, The Philosophy of Ibn 'Arabī (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008); Michel Chodkiewicz, An Ocean without Shore, trans. David Streight (Albany: State University of New-York Press, 1993); Toshihiko Izutsu, Sufism and Taoism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Henri Corbin, Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); idem, Alone with the Alone, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge, 2008); Michael A. Sells, Mystical Languages of Unsaying (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994); William Chittick, "Ibn 'Arabī's Own Summary of the Fuşûs: The Imprint of the Bezels of Wisdom", Journal of the Muhyiddin ibn 'Arabi

<sup>2</sup>Sa'diyyah Shaikh notes ibn 'Arabi's many female influences and followers, and his gender-balanced views in Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender and Sexuality (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). Jonathan Brown draws attention to Ibn 'Arabi's support for female imamate on the basis that the textual evidence adduced in opposition to it is, in the opinion of the Suffi, very weak (see Brown, Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of

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This article makes a unique contribution to this corpus by interrogating possibly Ibn 'Arabi's most daring and laudatory assessment of women in his well-known work, Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam.3 It will also engage with notable commentaries of the Fuṣūṣ in order to understand how Ibn 'Arabi's assessment of women was interpreted and promulgated by the best-known exegetes of the Akbarian order.

Seen by many as a distillation of Ibn 'Arabī's thought, albeit a highly arcane one, the Fusus brings together major facets of the mystic's metaphysical Weltanschauung. Each chapter of the work addresses the wisdom associated with one prophet mentioned in the Qur'an.4 It is in the final and most important chapter of this work - the chapter on Muhammad - that the Suff divulges the true significance of women.<sup>5</sup> The fact that Ibn 'Arabi should reserve exploration of the feminine principle for the most important chapter of the Fuṣūṣ has not been lost on other scholars,6 and it is an explicit declaration of the exceptionally high regard in which he holds women.

The whole chapter on Muhammad has correctly been deemed to be an exegesis of a short Prophetic tradition. In this tradition the Prophet declares, "Three things from this world of yours were made beloved to me"; he then mentioned women and perfume, and that his delight (qurrat 'aynī) was in prayer (salāh).8 In this lesser-known version that includes the word "three (thalāth)", the inclusion of "three" is particularly significant for the Sūfi, although this word does not appear in any of the well-known compilations of Hadith.9 It may be argued that, despite not mentioning the number, the Prophet does mention three things, but the masculine form of the number - which signifies that what he is counting is feminine since there is numerical gender reversal in Arabic for numbers three to ten – is itself especially significant for the Sufi and its omission, therefore, necessarily affects his interpretation. 10

Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy [London: Oneworld, 2015], p. 190). The concept of imamate in more general terms and its association with Ibn 'Arabi's philosophy is explored by 'Abd Al-Hakeem Carney in "Imamate and Love: The Discourse of the Divine in Islamic Mysticism", Journal of the American Academy of Religion 73/1 (2005): 705-30, http://www.jstor. org/stable/4139917 (accessed 19 October 2021).

<sup>3</sup>Of all of Ibn 'Arabī's works, none has captured the imagination of scholars quite like the Fuṣūṣ, as attested by the plethora of commentaries on it and works about it. Notable contributions on this work include: Ronald Nettler, Sufi Metaphysics and Quranic Prophets (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2003); Ismail Lala, Quranic Knowledge and Akbarian Wisdom: Ibn 'Arabi's Daring Hermeneutics in Fusus al-hikam; idem, "Contradiction and Paradox in the Mystical Hermeneutics of Ibn 'Arabī's Fuṣūs al-ḥikam", Maghreb Review 46/3 (2021): 291-313.

<sup>4</sup>The only exception to this is the penultimate chapter of the Fusus, which deals with Khālid ibn Sinān. Khālid is not mentioned in the Quran, but he is referred to as a prophet by Muhammad in a Hadith (see Abu Bakr al-Bazzār, Musnad, volumes I-18 [Madīnah: Maktabat al-'Ulūm wa-I-Hikam, 1988-2009], XI: 293).

<sup>5</sup>Huda Lutfi makes some preliminary observations on this issue in an article that focusses on the emergence of the cosmos as a conjugal union of the masculine divine command, which is active, and the feminine passive nature of the phenomenal world. The world, according to this interpretation, is therefore a "dynamic trio-reality: male and female united by Love" (Huda Lutfi, "The Feminine Element in Ibn 'Arabi's Mystical Philosophy", Journal of Comparative Poetics 5 (1985): 7-19, p. 16, doi:10.2307/521749). This article takes a more forensic look at the role of women in manifesting the divine Names as well as their role in reflecting the divine creative breath in their own creative capacity.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 15. <sup>7</sup>Ralph Austin, Ibn al-'Arabi: The Bezels of Wisdom (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 269.

Bibn 'Arabī, Fuşūs al-hikam, ed. Abul-'Alā' 'Afifi (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 2002), p. 214. <sup>9</sup>Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī (d. 405/1014) mentions that this tradition meets the criteria for inclusion in Muslim ibn Ḥajjāj's (d. 261/875) celebrated Ṣaḥiḥ, though he did not include it (Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī, Al-mustadrak 'ala-l-Ṣaḥīhayn, volumes |-4 [Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'llmiyya, 1990], Il:174). Other compilations that include it, all without the word "three", are: Abû Bakr al-Bayhaqī, Al-sunan al-kubrā volumes I-10 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 2003), VII: 124; Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Nasā'ī, Al-sunan al-ṣughrā, volumes I–9 (Aleppo: Maktab al-Maṭbū'āt al-Islāmiyya, 1986), VII: 61; Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, volumes I—45 (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 2001) XIX: 305; Ya'qūb ibn Isḥāq Abū 'Awāna, Mustakhraj, volumes I-5 (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rīfa, 1998), Ili: 14; Abū I-Qāsim al-Tabarānī, Al-mu'jam al-awsat, volumes I-10 (Cairo: Dār Ḥaramayn, n.d.), V: 241; al-Bazzār, Musnad, XIII: 296; Aḥmad ibn 'Alī Abū Ya'lā, Musnad Abū Ya'lā, volumes I–13 (Damascus: Dār al-Ma'mūn li-l-Turāth, 1984), VI: 199.