

## İbnü'l-Arabî Feminist mi?

Cennet Ceren Çavuş | <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6042-4273>  
ceren.cavus@alparslan.edu.tr

Muş Alparslan Üniversitesi | <https://ror.org/009axq942>  
İslami İlimler Fakültesi, Tasavvuf Anabilim Dalı, Muş, Türkiye

### Öz

Muhyiddîn İbnü'l-Arabî, 7./13. yüzyılda yaşamış ve tasavvufta paradigma değişikliği yapmış Endülüs'lü bir sufidir. Metafizik bir doktrin inşa etmiş ve kadınlık ve cinsiyet dâhil pek çok konu hakkında yazmıştır. Kadının metafizik durumu ve kadınlık hakkındaki düşünceleri onun İslami feminizme kaynak olarak yorumlanmasına neden olmaktadır. O, “insanlığı” paylaşmaktan dolayı kadın ve erkek arasında manevî eşitliği savunur ve kadının en yüksek velayet mertebesine (*kutbiyyet*) ulaşabileceğini iddia eder. Kadınların imamlığı, şahitliği ve tesettürüne ilişkin görüşlerinden dolayı, bazı çağdaş araştırmacılar tarafından kadın yanlısı bir düşünür olarak tasvir edilmektedir. Öte yandan, büyük bir ustaya “feminist” veya en azından “pro-feminist” (feminizm yanlısı) demek, feminizmin ana akım İslam düşüncesindeki olumsuz çağrışımları nedeniyle geleneksel Müslümanlar için kabul edilebilir değildir. Bu makale, temel feminist metinler üzerinden feminizmin ne olduğunu açıklayarak, İbnü'l-Arabî'nin cinsiyete yaklaşımını onun eserleri ve İbnü'l-Arabî'de cinsiyet hakkında yazılan eserler üzerinden eleştirel bir şekilde analiz etmektedir. Makalenin gayesi toplumsal cinsiyet araştırmacılarına İbnü'l-Arabî'yi, İslam araştırmacılarına ise feminizmi tanıtarak, İbnü'l-Arabî'nin kadın ve cinsiyet konularına yaklaşımını tartışmaktır.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Felsefe, Toplumsal Cinsiyet, Kadın Araştırmaları, Feminizm, İbnü'l-Arabî

### Öne Çıkanlar

- Feminizm, cinsiyete dayalı ayrımcılığın farkında olmak ve kadınların ezilmesine karşı çıkmak demektir.
- Feminizm zorunlu olarak kadın yanlısıdır fakat erkek karşıtı değildir ve genel olarak sanılanın aksine erkek nefretini gerektirmez.
- İbnü'l-Arabî, kadın yanlısı söylemleri ve uygulamaları nedeniyle İslamî feminizm için bir kaynak olarak görülmektedir.
- Kadınlarla ilgili bazı devrimsel düşünceleri olmasına rağmen, kadın-erkek ilişkisini Tanrı-âlem ilişkisine benzeterek ve katı bir cinsiyet hiyerarşisi kurarak feminizme oldukça aykırı bir şekilde kendi ataerkil kültürüne dayalı bir ontoloji inşa etmekte ve sosyolojiden ontoloji türetmektedir.
- Feminizm, haklar ve fırsatlar açısından cinsiyet eşitliği ile ilgilidir ve İbnü'l-Arabî maneviyat açısından fırsat eşitliğini savunsa da eşit hakları savunmaz, nitekim o ontolojik eşitlikten de yana değildir.

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## Is Ibn al-‘Arabī a Feminist?

Cennet Ceren Çavuş | <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6042-4273>  
ceren.cavus@alparslan.edu.tr

Muş Alparslan University | <https://ror.org/009axq942>  
Faculty of Islamic Sciences, Department of Sufism, Muş, Türkiye

### Abstract

Muhyiddīn Ibn al-‘Arabī is a very significant figure from 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup>-century Andalusia who made a paradigm shift in Sufism. He constructed a metaphysical doctrine and wrote about many issues including femininity and gender. His thoughts about the metaphysical state of women and femininity caused his approach to be interpreted as a source for Islamic feminism. He advocates for spiritual equality between men and women because of sharing “humanity” and asserts that women can attain the highest level of sainthood (*qutbiyya*). For his views on women’s imamate, testimony, and veiling, he is portrayed as a pro-woman thinker by some contemporary scholars. On the other hand, calling a great master “feminist” or at least “pro-feminist” is unacceptable for orthodox Muslims because of the pejorative connotations of feminism in mainstream Islamic thought. By explaining feminism through main feminist texts, and critically analyzing Ibn al-‘Arabī’s approach to gender through his works and books about gender issues in his philosophy, this paper attempts to introduce Ibn al-‘Arabī to gender scholars and feminism to Islamic scholars, and discuss his approach to women and gender.

### Keywords

Philosophy, Gender Studies, Women’s Studies, Feminism, Ibn al-‘Arabī

### Highlights

- Feminism means being aware of gender-based discrimination and opposing the oppression of women.
- Feminism is necessarily pro-woman but not anti-man, and it does not indicate male hatred as generally accepted by the public.
- Ibn al-‘Arabī is considered a spring for Islamic feminism because of his pro-women discourses and applications.
- Although he has some revolutionary thoughts concerning women, he constructs an ontology based on his patriarchal culture. He derives ontology from sociology by likening man-woman relations to God-cosmos relations and building a strict gender hierarchy, which is quite contrary to feminism.
- Feminism is about gender equality in terms of rights and opportunities and although Ibn Arabi advocates for equal opportunities in terms of spirituality, he does not advocate for equal rights and he is not for ontological equality either.

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## Introduction

Muhyiddin İbn al-‘Arabî (d. 638/1240) has been the most disputatious Muslim thinker for nine centuries since his death. He was called “the greatest master” by his followers and “the greatest infidel” by his opponents. He is considered the founder of the unity of being (*al-wahdah al-wujūd*) doctrine in Islam, which is likened to pantheism by some scholars. He constructed a metaphysical doctrine and wrote about many issues including femininity and gender. Some of his ideas about women and femininity are considered a source of Islamic feminism.

The first book written on İbn al-‘Arabî’s gender approach is Sachiko Murata’s *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relations in Islamic Thought*. In her book, Murata explains gender dualities in Islamic thought through the Taoist polarity of Yin and Yang and tries to describe the symbolic/spiritual meaning of gender in Islamic mysticism. Murata discusses gender as a cosmological phenomenon through which the cosmic order is organized. She explains the gender differences in Islamic spirituality by God’s names of beauty (*jamāl*) and majesty (*jalāl*) and attributes femininity to the names of beauty and masculinity to the names of majesty.<sup>1</sup> Referring to İbn al-‘Arabî, she asserts that the essence of God is feminine and it gave birth to both mercy and wrath, and since God’s mercy preceded his wrath, the essence’s “femininity is more real and fundamental than Her masculinity”.<sup>2</sup> Although Murata claims that there is complete spiritual equality between men and women, she uses the traditional gender categories to explain the ultimate reality as İbn al-‘Arabî did.

Sa’diyya Shaikh in her book *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: İbn ‘Arabî, Gender, and Sexuality* gives a Sufi feminist approach to gender through İbn al-‘Arabî. She stresses his ontology’s pro-woman aspects and focuses on “the political potential of İbn ‘Arabî’s philosophical, intellectual, and spiritual teachings, especially with regard to the possibilities it might offer Islamic feminism”.<sup>3</sup> She argues that some of his discourses reverse the traditional gender mappings and by giving evidence from his life she claims that İbn al-‘Arabî “fully recognizes the equal agency, ability, and value of men and women”,<sup>4</sup> which is argumentative.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I will give a brief outlook of İbn al-‘Arabî’s life and philosophy, explain feminism in detail, and discuss whether it is possible to call İbn al-‘Arabî a feminist or not.

## 1. Who is İbn al-‘Arabî?

Muhyiddin İbn al-‘Arabî was born in 1165 in Murcia, southeast of Andalusia. Even though he didn’t have a specific religious education when he was a child, in his teenage he had a mystical vision that instructed him to Sufism. Famous philosopher İbn

<sup>1</sup> Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relations in Islamic Thought* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 79.

<sup>2</sup> Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 324.

<sup>3</sup> Sa’diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: İbn Arabî, Gender and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 21.

<sup>4</sup> Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 93.

<sup>5</sup> For a review of her book see Cennet Ceren Çavuş, “Sufi Narratives of Intimacy İbn ‘Arabî, Gender, and Sexuality; Sa’diyya Shaikh”, *Arkhe-Logos* 7/14 (2022), 71-74.

Rushd (d. 595/1198) was a friend of Ibn al-'Arabī's father and the young Ibn al-'Arabī met him. According to Ibn al-'Arabī's statement, he taught Ibn Rushd a lesson about the difference between philosophical knowledge and Sufi gnosis and the significance of Sufi gnosis over philosophical knowledge.<sup>6</sup> He traveled to Tunis in his 30s and after a mystical vision that directed him to the East, he went to Anatolia where he met his most famous pupil, Sadraddīn Qunawī (d. 673/1274), who introduced his doctrine to the philosophical context. He visited many places including Syria, Egypt, Makkah, Medina, and Baghdad. He had good relationships with governing authorities where he settled.<sup>7</sup> He died in Damascus in 1240.

Ibn al-'Arabī was a quite productive scholar who wrote various books in his 75 years of life. According to Othmān Yahyā, among 850 works attributed to Ibn al-'Arabī, 700 are considered authentic and 400 reached the present day.<sup>8</sup> His most famous book is *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (The Ringstones of the Wisdoms), on which hundreds of commentaries were written. His most comprehensive book *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (The Meccan Openings), which is composed of 37 volumes, is also well-known. He is famous for a love poem book named *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* (The Interpreter of Desires), for which he was accused of being sexual in his poems and therefore he had to expound them to deny accusations. He has many other works some of which are in book size and some are like small treatises.

His works had impacts on Muslim geography during and after his life. His philosophy was maintained by significant Sufi scholars like Sadraddīn Qunawī, Muayyiduddīn Jandī (d. 691/1292), Dāwūd Qaysarī (d. 751/1350), Molla Jāmī (d. 898/1492), and Abdulghanī al-Nablusī (d. 1143/1731). His ideas were rejected by some other significant scholars like Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), 'Alī al-Qārī (d. 1014/1605), and Ahmad al-Sirhindī (d. 1034/1624). His mystical philosophy either gained currency or was slated by some scholars; as William Chittick asserts, no scholar did simply ignore him.<sup>9</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī has found favor in western scholarship in our century. There is an organization centered in Oxford named The Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society (MIAS) that "was founded in 1977 to promote a greater understanding of the work of Ibn al-'Arabī and his followers".<sup>10</sup> The society makes literal, audio, and visual publications, organizes events, and provides education for those who are interested in Ibn Arabi.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Beirut: Beirut: Dār al-ṣādir, 1911), 1/446. According to his narration Ibn Rushd wanted to meet with him, and Ibn al-'Arabī's father sent him to Ibn Rushd. Ibn Rushd, who was very happy to see Ibn al-'Arabī, showed him love and respect and asked whether the mystical knowledge was similar to the knowledge given by theoretical thought. Ibn al-'Arabī replied, "Yes and no! Between 'yes and no', souls fly out of their matter, necks out of bodies". Realizing what this meant, Ibn Rushd turned yellow and felt distressed. But then why did he praise Allah "for being present at a time when one of the members of that state who unlocked the doors and told him about the privilege of seeing him" (*al-Futūḥāt*, 1/446). With this narration, Ibn al-'Arabī wants to show that Sufism is superior to philosophy. However, as Rosenthal points out, this narrative is not realistic, on the contrary, it seems to be the product of Ibn al-'Arabī's virtuous imagination. (Franz Rosenthal, "Felsefe ile Tasavvuf Arasında İbn Arabi", çev. Ercan Alkan, *Tasavvuf* 24 2009/2, 130).

<sup>7</sup> William Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi* (PDF: Oneworld Publications, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi*.

<sup>9</sup> Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi*.

<sup>10</sup> Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society (MIAS), (Access 1 December 2022).

### 1.1. Ibn al-'Arabî's Philosophy

Ibn al-'Arabî is an original thinker who built a unique approach to both Sufism and philosophy. He philosophized Sufism and developed a mystical philosophy. Whether his approach is a philosophical Sufism or a mystical philosophy is a question that would be answered differently following one's priority.<sup>11</sup> In any case, Ibn al-'Arabî declares himself to not be a philosopher and constructs his approach based on mystical intuition, the "unveiling" (*kashf*) or "openings" (*futūḥāt*) as he prefers to use. He is considered a part of the tradition of "emphasizing the importance of mystical knowledge by criticizing the rationalist attitudes of philosophers" started by al-Ghazzālî and continued by 'Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānî<sup>12</sup>, therefore he criticized philosophers in many aspects. Moreover, he built his mystical philosophy or philosophical mysticism on his criticisms of philosophers and theologians.<sup>13</sup>

His metaphysical doctrine's main concern is to "see with two eyes", which means understanding God's similarity (*tashbîh*) and incomparability (*tanzîh*) at the same time.<sup>14</sup> God is both transcendent and immanent according to the Qur'ân, therefore to know God in the perfect sense, one should realize His transcendence and immanence. The eye that perceives the incomparability of God is the intellect/reason (*aql*), which cannot see God's similarity. That is why philosophers deny the verses of similarity in the Qur'ân. Hence, the eye through which one sees the similarity of God to the creatures is the imagination (*khayal*).<sup>15</sup> Ibn al-'Arabî employs this term to express God's immanence in the world.<sup>16</sup> For him, one should use both reason and imagination to know God in the perfect sense, therefore, Ibn al-'Arabî's approach to God combines the negative and positive theological positions. This conceptualization of him attracts attention to the harmonization of reason and mystical intuition. For stressing the importance of both ways of knowledge, Ibn Arabi could be considered both a mystic and a philosopher.

He is best known for the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd*, the Oneness of Being, or the Unity of Existence. He is told to use the expression just once as such while praying to God: "Make me see the unity of your being!"<sup>17</sup> However, he is not the theorizer of this

<sup>11</sup> The historical period after Ibn al-'Arabî is labeled as "philosophical Sufism" (Abd al-Qādir Maḥmūd, *al-Falsafa al-Sūfiyya fî al-Islām* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabî, 1946) and "metaphysical Sufism" (Ekrem Demirli, "Tasavvuf Araştırmalarında Dönemlendirme Sorunu: Din Bilimleri ile Metafizik Arasında Tasavvufun İlim Olma Mücadelesi", *Nazariyat: İslâm Felsefe ve Bilim Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi* 2/2 (2016), 25. On the other hand, Afîfî called Ibn al-'Arabî's approach "mystical philosophy" in order to attract attention to his holistic doctrine (Abū al-'alā Afîfî, *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid Din-Ibnul 'Arabi* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1939).

<sup>12</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Theoretical Gnosis and Doctrinal Sufism and their Significance Today", *Transcendent Philosophy*, London Academy of Iranic Studies, 1 (2007), 3-4.

<sup>13</sup> Cennet Ceren Çavuş, *İbn Arabî ve Schuon Tasavvufî Metafizik ve Ezeli Hikmet* (İstanbul: İnsan Yayınları, 2021), 113.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn al-'Arabî, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3/152.

<sup>15</sup> William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (SPK) (New York: SUNY Press, 1989), 361.

<sup>16</sup> Çavuş, Ibn Arabî ve Schuon, 111. The term imagination is a complicated one in Ibn al-'Arabî's thought. For some attempts to decipher his usage of the term see Henry Corbin, *L'Imagination Creatrice dans le Soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabî* (Paris: Flammarion, 1958) and Chittick, SPK.

<sup>17</sup> Mahmut Erol Kılıç, *İbnü'l-Arabî* (İstanbul: İSAM Yayınları, 2015), 116.

thought. Chittick asserts that it is not clear why the term was singled out to typify Ibn al-'Arabī's position. Maybe the prominence he gave to the word *wujūd* (existence) in his vocabulary and his stress on the *tawhīd* (unity) in his doctrine made him the so-called "founder" of the doctrine called *wahdat al-wujūd*.<sup>18</sup> The term *wujūd* had already been used by philosophers like Avicenna who made the distinction between the possible or contingent beings (*mumkin al-wujūd*) and the Necessary Being (*wājib al-wujūd*). Similarly, Ibn al-'Arabī called God "*al-wujūd al-mutlaq*", Absolute Being, which does not need anyone to exist, and called existent things "*al-wujūd al-muqayyad*", delimited being, which needs the Absolute Being to exist.<sup>19</sup> He adds another component to the categorization of the existents; "the third thing" (*al-shay' al-thālith*). It is the isthmus (*barzakh*) between the first two things and connects the Absolute and the delimited which are categorically distinct from each other. Since connecting the unseen to the seen, the absolute to the relative, Creator to the creations, or God to the cosmos is one of the core metaphysical matters, Ibn al-'Arabī's isthmus is an important attempt to solve an ancient ontological problem. This term is a significant contribution of Ibn al-'Arabī to metaphysics which will later be embraced and expressed as "the relative Absolute" by Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), another important Sufi metaphysician.<sup>20</sup>

Ibn al-'Arabī's ontology is composed of three major hierarchical categories. On the top, there is the Essence (*dhāt*) which is absolute and far from perception. One can only make negative theology about it since no attribute can be attributed to it. This level is even beyond God (Allah), which is at the second level of the ontological hierarchy. The level of divinity (*ulūhiyya*) is open to human perception because God informed us about the divine names (*al-asmā al-husnā*). The names of God are the names of divinity through which we can know Him. The last level of Ibn al-'Arabī's ontology is the universe/cosmos (*ālam*) which indicates the whole existent things. God's creation of the existent things is bringing them from His knowledge to the outer world. Every existent entity is present in God's knowledge as fixed entities (*al-a'yān al-thābita*) and when God calls them "be!" they become existent entities (*al-a'yān al-mawjūda*). The term fixed entities is a brilliant solution to the problem of the origin of creation. According to this categorization, fixed entities are eternal for being in the "mind" of God, and existent entities are not other than God since their origin is God's knowledge. This approach is an attempt to solve another major problem of Islamic philosophy; namely "eternity of the universe", for which significant Muslim philosophers like Al-Farābī and Avicenna were declared unbelievers by al-Ghazzālī.

<sup>18</sup> William Chittick, "Ibn 'Arabī", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition) Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

<sup>19</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *Inshā' al-Dawāir*, ed. H. S. Nyberg (Leiden: Kleinere Schriften des Ibn al- Arabi, 1919), 145.

<sup>20</sup> About the third thing Ibn al-'Arabī says: "it is qualified neither by existence nor by nonexistence, neither by new arrival nor by eternity.... The cosmos becomes manifest from this Third Thing, for this thing is the Reality of the Universal Realities of the cosmos, which are intelligible to the mind.... If you say that this thing is the cosmos, you speak the truth, and if you say that it is the Eternal Real, you speak the truth. If you say that it is neither the cosmos nor the Real but rather an added meaning, you speak the truth" (Ibn al-'Arabī, *Inshā' al-Dawāir*, 146). For a broader information about the "third thing" of Ibn al-'Arabī and the "relative Absolute" of Schuon, see Çavuş, İbn Arabi ve Schuon, 190-205.



Ibn Arabi is original also in terms of his approach to God's mercy. He regarded mercy as the primary principle of existence with the term "breath of the All-Merciful" (*nafas al-rahmān*), "which is the deployment of existence (*inbisāt al-wujūd*); indeed, existence itself is synonymous with mercy (*rahma*)".<sup>21</sup> *Al-Rahmān* (the all-Merciful) is the name of God most mentioned in the Qur'ān after the name Allah. Names of God are of great importance in Ibn al-'Arabî's ontology and ethics. Their ontological significance comes from being the essence of existent things. Every single existence is a manifestation of a name of God and knowing them means knowing God. The special attention given to Adam in the Qur'ān is that God taught him all names, which made him valuable in the eyes of God and the angels.<sup>22</sup> For Ibn al-'Arabî, these names are the names of God and since they are the sources of each existence, Adam has the potential to see God's names everywhere. They are also important in terms of ethics because humans can attain perfection by following them. God is perfect and resembling Him would make the human perfect, which is "becoming characterized by the divine names (*al-takhalluq bi asmā' Allāh*), a process discussed by al-Ghazzālî among others and called by Avicenna *al-ta'alluh*, being like unto God, or deiformity".<sup>23</sup> God created Adam, the first human, in the image of "Allah", which is the all-comprehensive name (*al-ism al-jāmi'*), and that means humans have the capacity to comprehend all names of God and also all existents. That is why human is called the "microcosm" (*al-ālam al-saghîr*) meaning small cosmos, while the cosmos is called the "macroadam" (*ādam al-kabîr*) meaning big Adam.

The purpose of existence in Ibn al-'Arabî's metaphysics is God's self-disclosure. God wants to see Himself in the mirror of the universe and every existent entity. The perfect mirror which gives the best vision is the perfect human being (*al-insān al-kāmil*). Through her/him, God can see Himself in the perfect reflection. The ontological status of the perfect human is described with the term "*al-haqīqa al-muhammadiyya*", which means the Muhammadan Reality, as the first created thing from which every other thing was created.<sup>24</sup> It is the origin of all existence.

Last but not least Ibn al-'Arabî gave an original approach to the God-cosmos relationships that I call "both and nor logic". According to the principle of noncontradiction in formal logic, the universe is either God or not God, it can't be both God and not God at the same time. However, Ibn al-'Arabî argued about the universe that, it is He/God and not He/God (*huwa la huwa*) at the same time.<sup>25</sup> With this anti-logical approach, he wants to attract attention to the relational (*nisbî*) aspect of existence.<sup>26</sup> In one respect the universe is God because God is immanent, in another respect the universe is not God because of His transcendence. Similarly, he says about the Real (*al-*

<sup>21</sup> Chittick, "Ibn 'Arabî".

<sup>22</sup> al-Baqarah 2/30-34.

<sup>23</sup> Chittick, "Ibn 'Arabî".

<sup>24</sup> Çavuş, İbn Arabi ve Schuon, 235-236.

<sup>25</sup> Ibn al-'Arabî, *al-Futūḥāt*, 2/379.

<sup>26</sup> Relationality is very important in Ibn al-'Arabî's which makes his philosophy comparable to a postmodern philosopher, Jacques Derrida. See Ian Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi* (London: Routledge, 2004).

*Haqq*) that He is the One/the Many (*al-wāhid al-kathîr*), which means the Real is One in Essence and many in the name. Perceiving the Real is a matter of perspective and to see Him in a perfect sense one needs two eyes, namely reason, and imagination. Since the two see contrary things, to reconcile these contradictions, one needs “both and nor logic” to comprehend the relational structure of existence.

## 2. What is Feminism?

Feminism, first of all, is an approach advocating equal rights and opportunities for women with men. “Theoretical feminism” is to be cognitively against gender-based discrimination, namely sexism, and oppression, while “practical feminism” is to take action to prevent this oppression, which might vary from abandoning a gendered language to making public campaigns against sexism. Men and women who are aware of gender-based discrimination and oppose the oppression of women are feminists.

As bell hooks points out, there is a connection between sexism, racism, and other forms of group oppression.<sup>27</sup> Degrading a group of people depending on their race is called racism, degrading them for their disability is ableism, degrading them for their age is ageism and likewise degrading them for their sex is called sexism. Racism, ableism, ageism, sexism, and other forms of oppression through marginalization are unjust. Gender discrimination is one of the injustices and “feminism is grounded on the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged by comparison with men, and that their oppression is in some way illegitimate or unjustified.”<sup>28</sup> Thus feminism is “an umbrella term for a range of views about injustices against women”.<sup>29</sup>

Feminism is “a movement to end sexism and sexist oppression”<sup>30</sup>. Throughout known history, women were oppressed in society by being deprived of education, property, and some other opportunities that men had. This had been the case for slaves for centuries, however, although slavery was abandoned, women’s deprivation of a free man’s rights continued.

Feminism is about gender equality in terms of rights and opportunities. Gender equality does not mean “sameness” or “identicalness”, it rather means “equality in” rights, freedoms, and opportunities.<sup>31</sup> Demanding equal rights for women goes back to antiquity<sup>32</sup>, but the first known woman who demanded the right to education for women in *The Book of the City of Ladies* and *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* is Christine de Pisan (1364-1430). Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793) advocated for women’s political rights in her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the [Female] Citizen* in 1791, as a response to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*,

<sup>27</sup> bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989), 22.

<sup>28</sup> Susan James, “Feminism”, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998), 576.

<sup>29</sup> Noëlle McAfee, “Feminist Philosophy”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition) Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

<sup>30</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (New York - London: Routledge, 2015), 68.

<sup>31</sup> Hülya Şimğa, *A Question for Humanity Sexism, Oppression and Women’s Rights* (Zürich: LIT Verlag Münster, 2019), 30. For a criticism of the false dilemma of “gender equality versus gender justice” -as Şimğa calls it- see *ibid.*, 30-38.

<sup>32</sup> Laura Brunell - Elinor Burkett, “Feminism”, *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Access 30 December 2022).

which did not address the rights of women. The 10th article of her declaration of women's rights was "woman has the right to mount the scaffold; she must equally have the right to mount the stand"<sup>33</sup>. She was executed to death and by mounting the scaffold she opened the way to mounting the stand for women.

Around the same years a British lady, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which is accepted as the birth of modern feminism.<sup>34</sup> With a brilliant intellectuality, she criticized the detractors of women, Rousseau being the first. For her sharp arguments about men-women relationships and her professional style, while showing men's wrongdoing and society's injustice against women, she is considered "the mother of feminism"<sup>35</sup>. After Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) wrote about political equality, then public opinion began to reflect on the question of women's rights in England. The parliament member John Stuart Mill's (1806-1873) efforts were noteworthy for British women's acquiring rights.

The women's movement in America ran parallel to the abolitionist movement. Like the black people who fought for their "human rights", women demanded their human rights at the same time. There were many women in the Quakers movement<sup>36</sup> who played a crucial role in the abolition of slavery. However, the women were not accepted in the Quakers congress held in 1840 in London, then Lucretia Mott (1793-1880) organized a convention in Seneca Falls the same year and held a demonstration that put the seal on the American women's rights agenda declaring that "men and women are created equal, endowed with irrevocable rights by the Creator... The government's job is to protect these rights."<sup>37</sup>

Feminism is strictly related to the political rights movement, as Atherton puts it "suffrage is the cornerstone of feminism".<sup>38</sup> As a political rights movement feminism started in the 19th century, however before that period, there were feminists among men and women who were disturbed by oppression depending on gender. Although the word "feminism" was not used before the 1880s, the idea of having the same rights as men in all respects was present before the invention of the term.<sup>39</sup> The first person who used the term "feminist" was Hubertine Auclert (1848-1914). She called herself a feminist in her periodical publication *La Citoyenne*<sup>40</sup>, which means "female citizen". She advocated for the full equality of women and men before the law.

The word feminist was considered pejorative even by feminists till the 1970s.<sup>41</sup> Further today some people attribute male hatred to feminism. Karen Offen's words are a

<sup>33</sup> Sophie Mousset, *Women's Rights and the French Revolution* (PDF: Taylor and Francis, 2017).

<sup>34</sup> Dani Cavallaro, *Critical and Cultural Theory: Thematic Variations* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2001), 111.

<sup>35</sup> Bhaskar Shukla, *Feminism From Mary Wollstonecraft to Betty Friedan* (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2007), 2.

<sup>36</sup> Quakers were a Protestant group, known for their opposition to slavery.

<sup>37</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *İkinci Cinsiyet Olgular ve Efsaneler*, trans. Gülnur Acar Savran (İstanbul: Koç Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2022), 162.

<sup>38</sup> Gertrude Atherton, *The Living Present* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company Publishers, 1917), 209.

<sup>39</sup> Winifred Stephens, *Women of the French Revolution* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co, 1922), 236.

<sup>40</sup> Hubertine Auclert, "A Monsieur le Prefet de la Seine", *La Citoyenne* 4 (1882), 1.

<sup>41</sup> Jane Freedman, *Concepts in the Social Sciences, Feminism* (Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2001), 3.

good answer to this slander: “Feminism is necessarily pro-woman. However, it does not follow that feminism must be anti-men. Neither all women are feminists, nor all feminists are women. Surprising as it may seem, well into the twentieth century some of the most important advocates of women’s emancipation have been men (though they have constituted a small minority)”.<sup>42</sup>

### 2.1. Multiple Feminisms

Feminist writers stress feminism’s multifaceted position,<sup>43</sup> therefore categorization of feminism types vary. Most of the feminists agreed on categorizing feminist history in three waves. The term “wave” determines the stages of the feminist movement. The first wave started with the suffrage movement in England and the USA in the 19th century and continued till the political rights of women were attained at the beginning of the 20th century. This wave of feminism, which was liberal, was concerned with equality between the sexes. The second wave of feminism which had a radical tone started in the 1960s and it resisted patriarchal culture’s unseen laws and demanded reproductional rights and “equal pay for equal work”.<sup>44</sup> The third wave, started in the 1990s, is a “colored”, post-colonialist, global feminism and claims to embrace all women of the world that are different from each other in terms of race, ethnicity, or belief. In the historical process the waves are continuous and tracing them would give a brief outlook on feminism.

The general concern of the first wave of feminism was “equality”<sup>45</sup> and the abolitionist movement was effective in its spread.<sup>46</sup> This type of feminism is usually called liberal feminism. Liberal feminists did not question the social structure which was the origin of the inequalities, they only went after equal rights.<sup>47</sup> They were emphasizing the reform of society rather than revolutionary change.<sup>48</sup> This type of feminism is the origin of the political feminism movement on which the others developed.

In the second wave the origin of asymmetrical gender relations was questioned, the patriarchy was found guilty, and feminism started to diversify in terms of political and philosophical orientations. Marxist, socialist, radical, lesbian, existentialist, and psychoanalytic feminisms fought with cultural inequalities. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) was the Bible of this wave.<sup>49</sup> Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystic* (1963), Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1969), and Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) were also considerable texts of the second wave.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Karen Offen, *European Feminisms: 1970-1950: A Political History* (California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 21.

<sup>43</sup> Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 196; Chris Beasley, *What is Feminism?: An Introduction to Feminist Theory*, (London: Sage Publication, 1999), 43.

<sup>44</sup> Cavallaro, *Critical and Cultural Theory*, 112.

<sup>45</sup> Barbara Arneil, *Politics & Feminism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 156.

<sup>46</sup> Elmas Şahin, *Batı’da ve Türkiye’de Kadın Hareketleri ve Feminizm* (Ankara: Ürün Yayınları, 2013), 412.

<sup>47</sup> Caroline Ramazanoglu, *Feminism and the Contradictions of Oppression* (PDF: Taylor and Francis, 2012).

<sup>48</sup> Beasley, *What is Feminism?*, 52.

<sup>49</sup> Fredrica Scarth, *The Other Within Ethics, Politics, and the Body in Simone de Beauvoir* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 21.

<sup>50</sup> Cavallaro, *Critical and Cultural Theory*, 112.

While liberal feminism focused on the public rights of women, radical feminism focused on the private sphere with the slogan of Carol Hanisch, “the personal is political”. This expression was used to indicate the systematic oppression of men over women in all spheres of life.<sup>51</sup> The term “political” indicates power relationships for feminists,<sup>52</sup> hence “sex is a status category with political implications”.<sup>53</sup> By defining intimate relationships as “political”, they politicized sexuality and by questioning the legitimacy of any social order which created and maintained the oppression of women by men, they exposed men’s normal behavior as a widespread social problem.<sup>54</sup>

Radical feminists considered family the source of male dominance over women.<sup>55</sup> Some radical feminists are against the distinctions between men and women. For Shulamit Firestone, the aim of the women’s revolution should not only be to destroy male domination, but also to eliminate sexual distinction.<sup>56</sup> Kate Millet put the social family structure on the target.<sup>57</sup> Some radical feminists regard men as oppressive and reject allying with them.<sup>58</sup> Some of them argued that one should be a lesbian to be a real feminist.<sup>59</sup> For such reasons even some feminists accused radical feminists of being “separatist, misandrist (man-hater), family destroyers and lesbians”.<sup>60</sup> However, these radical feminists “broke new ground in feminist theory, and stimulated new forms of political activity among women.”<sup>61</sup> One of the biggest contributions of radical feminism is to form public opinion about violence against women and the institutionalization of anti-violence organizations.<sup>62</sup>

Among the second wave of feminisms psychoanalytic and existentialist feminisms are significant. Psychoanalytic feminism, by negating the findings of Freud and his followers, showed the lack of men’s knowledge about women and brought the female point of view into psychoanalysis.<sup>63</sup> Existentialist feminism is important for expressing the significance of the female subject’s selfhood. Simone de Beauvoir in her monumental book *The Second Sex* attracted attention to the “otherness” of women in comparison to the “selfhood” of men. Throughout history, men had been the primary actors in society, and they considered women as “others” while they were real selves. The patriarchal society collaborates to deprive women of their subjectivity and turn them into objects of men.<sup>64</sup> Beauvoir suggests women realize their selfhood and attain

<sup>51</sup> Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1983), 101.

<sup>52</sup> Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1970), 23.

<sup>53</sup> Millet, *Sexual Politics*, 24.

<sup>54</sup> Ramazanoglu, *Feminism*.

<sup>55</sup> Dilek İmançer, “Feminizm ve Yeni Yönelimler”, *Doğu Batı* 6/19 (2005), 162.

<sup>56</sup> Shulamit Firestone, *Cinselliğin Diyalektiği*, Trans. Yurdanur Salman, 2. edition (İstanbul: Payel Yayınları, 1993), 22.

<sup>57</sup> Millet, *Sexual Politics*, 62.

<sup>58</sup> Joyce Gelb, *Feminism and Politics: A Comparative Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 32.

<sup>59</sup> Amanda Udis-Kessler, “Identity/Politics: A History of the Bisexual Movement”, *Bisexual Politics: Theories, Queries, and Visions*, ed. Naomi Tucke (Haworth Press, 1995), 20.

<sup>60</sup> Şahin, *Batı’da ve Türkiye’de*, 300.

<sup>61</sup> Ramazanoglu, *Feminism*.

<sup>62</sup> Şahin, *Batı’da ve Türkiye’de*, 306.

<sup>63</sup> Şahin, *Batı’da ve Türkiye’de*, 323-324.

<sup>64</sup> Beauvoir, *İkinci Cinsiyet*, 28.

their subjectivity, which can happen when “the woman does not define herself according to man”<sup>65</sup>.

Another important contribution of Beauvoir is her emphasis on the “gender” phenomena which refers to the non-biological social roles given to the sexes. By saying “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” she attracted attention to the significance of social roles given to women by society. Her gender conceptualization became a backbone for gender studies.

Betty Friedan in 1983 argued that feminism ended as an important movement after the attainment of political rights for women and feminists after the 1920s started to be concerned with human rights.<sup>66</sup> Then in 1998, Time Magazine published an issue named “Is feminism dead?” and answered “yes”.<sup>67</sup> The third-wave feminist works are an answer to Time’s claim about feminism’s death.

The third wave started with Rebecca Walker’s article “*Becoming the Third Wave*”.<sup>68</sup> This wave focuses on the diversity of women, multiculturalism, globalism, migration, and coalition politics. The third-wave feminists also question identity and biological sexuality<sup>69</sup> and don’t accept absolutist perspectives concerning any issue. In this sense, they are a product of the contemporary postmodern culture.

Black feminism/Womanism, postmodern feminism, Islamic feminism, ecofeminism, and posthumanist feminism are considered within the third wave. Black feminism/Womanism rose in the 1990s with Alice Walker’s book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). Walker attracted attention to the “whiteness” of feminism and offered an alternative term for black feminism; womanism. Womanism criticized previous feminisms for being indifferent to ethnic and racial differences among women.<sup>70</sup>

Postmodern feminism advocate for gender equality by rejecting essentialism, universalism, and absolutism. It embraces differences among women. Depending on Beauvoir’s sex-gender distinction, postmodern feminists criticized the idea that only gender is socially constructed. According to Judith Butler biological or material things (such as the body) are also subject to the social construction processes, therefore no subject is “woman”.<sup>71</sup> Lucy Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Helene Cixous, who reject the modernist dualities, are among the first postmodernist feminists.<sup>72</sup>

Islamic feminism embraces Islam while advocating for women’s rights and gender equality. Islamic feminists attribute patriarchal relationships among Muslims to the wrong interpretations of the Qur’ân and the life of Prophet Muhammad and they see

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<sup>65</sup> Direk, “Önsöz”, *İkinci Cinsiyet*, 17.

<sup>66</sup> Betty Friedan, *Kadınlığın Gizemi*, trans. Tahire Mertoğlu (İstanbul: E Yayınları, 1983), 88.

<sup>67</sup> Time Magazine, “Is Feminism Dead?” (Access 30 December 2022).

<sup>68</sup> Rebecca Walker, “Becoming the Third Wave”, *Identity Politics in the Women’s Movement*, ed. Barbara Ryan (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 78-80.

<sup>69</sup> Arneil, *Politics & Feminism*, 155.

<sup>70</sup> Ramazanoğlu, *Feminism*.

<sup>71</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (PDF: Taylor and Francis, 2011). For an analysis of Butler’s approach see Mehmet Fatih Işık, *Feminist Söylemde Yeni Bir Bakış: Judith Butler* (İstanbul: DBY, 2022).

<sup>72</sup> Susan Hekman, “Feminism”, *The Routledge Companion to Critical Theory*, eds. Simon Malpas and Paul Wake (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 98.

the problem with the culture not with the religion.<sup>73</sup> Some of them consider the Prophet “one of the first feminists of the world”.<sup>74</sup> However, in most Muslim countries, feminists do not like to be labeled as feminists because of the wrong images and prejudices about feminism.

Ecofeminism gained popularity in the 1980s as a part of the Green political movement.<sup>75</sup> It is built on the idea that women and nature have been exploited by men. For ecofeminists nature is a feminist issue,<sup>76</sup> they draw on the concept of gender to analyze the relationships between humans and nature.<sup>77</sup> They are not only against the nature-culture dichotomy but also other hierarchical dualisms of the modern paradigm.<sup>78</sup> Ecofeminists are against any kind of oppression of a dominant group.

Posthumanist feminism, which is considered a branch of ecofeminism, is especially significant in the feminist context. Posthumanism is important for being a philosophical approach developed by feminist scholars like Katherine Hayles, Donna Haraway, and Rosi Braidotti.<sup>79</sup> It is a school of thought based on criticisms of Humanism for its definition of human which is a “white, European, head of a heterosexual family and its children, and able-bodied” male.<sup>80</sup> They oppose Western dualisms like self/other, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, and God/man. Donna Haraway offers blurring distinctions that sustain relationships of domination among humans and between humans and other units of nature.<sup>81</sup> As Braidotti states, with Haraway’s work “the collective feminist exit from Anthropos began to gather momentum”<sup>82</sup> and many feminist scholars started to take Posthumanism seriously.<sup>83</sup>

As pointed out above, there are various types of feminism. Today there is a huge vast of feminist material that affects the culture as a whole. As Rocha argues, no man, woman, or child does not change more or less with the global persuasiveness of feminism.<sup>84</sup> Now feminism is an umbrella for various women from all over the World, Western, Native American, Middle-Eastern, Muslim, black, white, colored, African, Asian, etc., and each of them reveals their color and their specific gender problems.

<sup>73</sup> Necla Arat, *Feminizmin ABC’si* (İstanbul: Say Yayınları, 2022), 22. For Muslim feminists’ views see Kadri Yıldırım, *İslami Feminizm* (İstanbul: Avesta, 2019).

<sup>74</sup> Asma Gull Hasan, *American Muslims* (Continuum International Publishing Groups, 2002), 124.

<sup>75</sup> Heather Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies* (Continuum International Publishing Groups, 2005), 13.

<sup>76</sup> Karen Warren, “Taking Empirical Data Seriously: An Ecofeminist Philosophical Perspective”, *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, ed. Karen Warren (Indiana University Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>77</sup> Sherilyn MacGregor, *Beyond Mothering Earth: Ecological Citizenship and the Politics of Care* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), 286.

<sup>78</sup> Mary Mellor, *Sınırları Yıkamak Feminist, Yeşil bir Sosyalizme Doğru*, trans. Osman Akınbay (İstanbul: Ayrıntı Yayınları, 1993), 73.

<sup>79</sup> Cennet Ceren Çavuş, “Tranhumanism, Posthumanism and the “Cyberg Identity”, *Fe Dergi* 13/1 (2021), 180.

<sup>80</sup> Rosi Braidotti, “Four Thesis on Posthuman Feminism”, *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 23.

<sup>81</sup> Çavuş, “Tranhumanism”, 183.

<sup>82</sup> Braidotti, “Four Thesis on Posthuman Feminism”, 28.

<sup>83</sup> Çavuş, “Tranhumanism”, 178.

<sup>84</sup> Jennifer Rocha, “A Superior Place: The Impact of feminism in Our World”, *Feminism Now* (New Mexico Uni, Spring 2006), 18.

### 3. Ibn al-'Arabī and Gender

Gender in Ibn al-'Arabī's metaphysics is a very significant tool for constructing his ontology. He explains the cosmic order with gendered terms like fathers, mothers, females, males, sexual union, and offspring. Sexuality on the cosmic level is the universal power of productivity,<sup>85</sup> that works through feminine-masculine relationships. The whole universe is a result of sexual intercourse between active fathers and receptive mothers.<sup>86</sup> For him, "everything that exercises an effect is a father and, everything that receives an effect is a mother".<sup>87</sup>

Ibn al-'Arabī attributes activity to masculinity and receptivity to femininity.<sup>88</sup> Murata stresses the relational aspect of gender in Ibn al-'Arabī's ontology.<sup>89</sup> In relation to God, everything is female because the universe is the place God acts upon; therefore, every creature in the universe is "female" on the ontological level.<sup>90</sup> However, God is always male for being the "Absolute Actor". In Ibn al-'Arabī's ontology, concerning God-man-woman ternary, only man's gender is relational. Man is active/male in relation to the woman while he is passive/female in relation to God. God is absolutely active while the woman is absolutely passive.<sup>91</sup> The important point here in terms of gender is that Ibn al-'Arabī puts man above woman in the ontological hierarchy and regards gender roles for women as essential. By calling God "male" in relation to the universe Ibn al-'Arabī not only repeats the gender roles of a patriarchal society but also constructs an ontology based on that patriarchal culture. He derives ontology from sociology.

Depending on the Qur'ān and the narratives coming from the Prophet, he builds an inferiority discourse to the detriment of women. He interprets the famous verse "Men are the managers (*qawwām*) of women, because of the advantage Allah has granted some of them over others, and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth"<sup>92</sup>. According to him, the reason of superiority is being the leader of the family by feeding them. Women need men to survive like creatures need God to survive. Women are families of men, as "all the creatures are family of God".<sup>93</sup> This position is clearly in line with Ibn al-'Arabī's era's socioeconomic structure. Here again, he regards women's socioeconomic dependency as essential and likens this fact to the cosmos' dependency on God. He puts men as God in their relation to women.

Depending on a verse about divorce indicating that men have a degree (*daracah*) over women<sup>94</sup> he constructs a discourse of "degrees of men over women" like activity,

<sup>85</sup> Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 147.

<sup>86</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3/231.

<sup>87</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 1/138.

<sup>88</sup> The "active man-passive woman" discourse goes back to Aristotle who mentions "the passive contribution of woman and the active contribution of man to generation" (Prudence Allen, "Plato, Aristotle, and the Concept of Woman in Early Jewish Philosophy" *Florilegium* 9 (1987), 93).

<sup>89</sup> Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 145.

<sup>90</sup> Cennet Ceren Çavuş, "Femininity in Sufism Ontology of Sex According to Ibn Arabi", *Prehistoryadan Günümüze Kadın*, ed. Meral Hakman (Ankara: Bilgin Kültür Sanat Yayınları, 2020), 344.

<sup>91</sup> Çavuş, "Femininity in Sufism", 200.

<sup>92</sup> Al-Nisā 4/34

<sup>93</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *Fütūḥāt-ı Mekkiyye*, trans. Ekrem Demirli (İstanbul: Litera Yayıncılık, 2011), 16/295.

<sup>94</sup> "Divorced women shall wait concerning themselves for three monthly periods. Nor is it lawful for them to hide what Allah Hath created in their wombs if they have faith in Allah and the Last Day. And their



priority, causality, totality, and creation. Depending on the rib narrative which says “Eve is created from Adam’s rib”<sup>95</sup> he considers Eve secondary, partial, receptive, and inferior.<sup>96</sup> For him “woman can never be equal to man, for the passive cannot be equal to the active. The cosmos is receptive in relation to God, therefore it is not equal to God. Eve is receptive in relation to Adam, and Adam is active upon Eve, therefore she is not equal to him in this respect”.<sup>97</sup> Here again, he likens man-woman relation to God-cosmos relation and builds a strict gender hierarchy. This approach cannot be compatible with the feminist perspective.

Ibn al-‘Arabî constructs ontological gender models and regards them as essential. For him “the part can never be like the total”<sup>98</sup> therefore although a woman can reach perfection (*kamāl*) her perfection is specific, not a total one. In Ibn al-‘Arabî’s approach, human perfection comes from being created in the image of God, however, Adam is created in the image of God while Eve is created in the image of Adam.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, Eve does not have a direct relation with the image of God for being created from Adam. “As a result, Eve, and by extension, all women, don’t have the opportunity of achieving full perfection as men have.”<sup>100</sup>

Perfection is attained by man through sexual intercourse. Copulation is a way for man to witness God through women according to Ibn al-‘Arabî.<sup>101</sup> However, the woman does not have such a chance or Ibn al-‘Arabî never refers to it. This situation reflects that Ibn al-‘Arabî did not regard women as equal agents with men who can witness God in a sexual relationship. A reciprocal act is a way for men to attain perfection but it doesn’t have the same function for women in Ibn al-‘Arabî’s philosophy. His stance on this issue indicates his inegalitarian approach to sexuality and therefore perfection.

Despite his above-mentioned approach to women, Ibn al-‘Arabî is considered “promising” for Islamic feminism. Sa’diyya Shaikh offers his ideas as a basis for Islamic feminism.<sup>102</sup> She claims that his cosmological teachings “provide possibilities for a powerful, organic, and ontologically grounded critique of patriarchal power relations”.<sup>103</sup> She dedicated her book to showing this possibility to the feminists.

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husbands have the better right to take them back in that period if they wish for reconciliation. And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (*daracah*) over them. And Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise.” (al-Baqarah 2/228).

<sup>95</sup> “Eve is created from a rib of Adam” is a hadith narrative indicated in many hadith books like Bukhari, Nikah 79; Müslim, Reda 65, etc. This narrative is also a verse of the Bible (Genesis 2:22).

<sup>96</sup> For an extended discussion of Ibn Arabî’s androcentric ontology see Cennet Ceren Çavuş, “Androcentric Ontology of Ibn Arabî and Frithjof Schuon”, *Felsefe Dünyası* 76 (2022).

<sup>97</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabî, *Fütûhât*, 12/57.

<sup>98</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabî, *Fütûhât*, 5/282.

<sup>99</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabî, *Fütûhât*, 5/282.

<sup>100</sup> Çavuş, “Androcentric Ontology”, 194.

<sup>101</sup> In the last chapter of his *Bezels of Wisdom*, which is dedicated to Prophet Muhammed, Ibn al-‘Arabî pictures sexual intercourse as a perfective element for men, which is a way to witness God through women. As a locus of witnessing God in the most complete and the most perfect sense, the woman is needed. That is why the Prophet said “Women were made lovable to me” (Ibn al-‘Arabî, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. Abū al-‘Alā Afifî (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Arabî, 1946), 210). For more information, see Çavuş, “Femininity in Sufism”.

<sup>102</sup> Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 203-228.

<sup>103</sup> Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 81.

Ibn al-'Arabī's writings shelter some pro-woman discourses. For example, he stresses the femininity of some words like *dhāt* (essence) and *sifah* (attribute), which are fundamental concepts in his ontology. It is important to note that the Essence (*dhāt*) is ontologically superior to God in Ibn al-'Arabī's metaphysical doctrine.<sup>104</sup> He argues that the femininity of the word *dhāt* is enough to show the superiority of femininity<sup>105</sup>, however, he makes no explanation for this superiority. He similarly argues that the additional letter in the word "woman" (in Arabic man is called *mar'* and a woman is called *mar'a* with an additional letter), compensates for the women's lack arising from the degree which men have above women.<sup>106</sup> By just mentioning women's superiority through the femininity of some words and not making any explanation about it, he seems to intend to balance the superiority discourse.

Ibn al-'Arabī makes groundbreaking comments on controversial issues about women such as imamate, testimony, and veiling. He claims that women can be imams to both women and men: "Women's imamate is sound. The basic principle is allowing it. One who forbids it without any proof should be ignored. Because there is no commandment forbidding it. Therefore, the basic principle is that their imamate is permissible."<sup>107</sup> This view is contrary to the orthodox Islamic canons.

Similarly, he reverses the normative gendered position of legal testimony, in which a man's testimony is worth that of two women.<sup>108</sup> He stresses the cases when the testimony of one woman equals that of two men like menstruation, the waiting period after divorce, and the statement about who is the father of her child.<sup>109</sup> Shaikh argues that Ibn Arabi's reading of the law "resists the notion that male testimony is inherently superior" and "gives salience to women's agency and legal capacity".<sup>110</sup> However, with a feminist reading, one would say that his approach is a reflection of the patriarchal normativity in which a woman's experience is limited to her body and cannot reach the public arena. Therefore Shaikh's reading of Ibn al-'Arabī's remark on women's testimony, which is presented as a pro-women aspect of Ibn al-'Arabī's approach, can be read the opposite way.

Another remark of Ibn al-'Arabī about women which is regarded as proper to be read as pro-feminine is about women's veiling. Veiling in Islam is considered an introverting effect for women, which prevents them from being visible in the public space. In orthodox Islam, the parts that should be covered (*'awra*) in a woman's body are every organ except the face and hands. However, for Ibn al-'Arabī the genitals of women are the only part of their bodies that should be veiled because both Adam and Eve covered their genitals in Paradise after they sinned. Women cover their bodies "for the sake of modesty, and not because their bodies are shameful".<sup>111</sup> With this

<sup>104</sup> See, Çavuş, *İbn Arabi ve Schuon*.

<sup>105</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *Fütûhât*, 2009, 11/173.

<sup>106</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *Fütûhât*, 2009, 11/173.

<sup>107</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futûhât*, 1/447.

<sup>108</sup> Al-Baqarah 2/282.

<sup>109</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futûhât*, 3/89.

<sup>110</sup> Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 83

<sup>111</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futûhât*, 1/408.

interpretation, as Shaikh asserts, Ibn al-'Arabî debunks pervasive notions about women's bodies.<sup>112</sup> His remark is considered pro-feminine because of the perceptions about veiling's limiting effect on women. However, veiling might be perceived as a liberating phenomenon by some Muslim feminists.

Ibn al-'Arabî's relationship with Nizâm can be read as an indicator of his pro-women approach. His exceptional narration of this young, beautiful, and wise lady, debunks the patriarchal stereotypes of the ideal woman who is introverted, homely, veiled, and apart from public interaction. Nizâm instructed Ibn al-'Arabî to the right path and glamorized him not only with her beauty but also with her wisdom. Shaikh is right to argue that "Ibn 'Arabî's portrayal of Nizâm provides alternative imaginings of gender and female subjectivity".<sup>113</sup>

Ibn al-'Arabî's relationships with other women also show his pro-woman perspective. As he declares he had female Sufi masters and disciples as well. Among fourteen of his fifteen disciples to whom he invested a cardigan (*khirqqa*), which is a symbol of spiritual perfection, were women.<sup>114</sup> He also argues that women can attain the highest level of sainthood -polehood (*qutbiyyah*)- and when he defines perfect human, he not only points out males but also females.<sup>115</sup> He asserts that humanity is a reality that embraces both men and women, therefore there is no superiority of men over women in this respect.<sup>116</sup> He accepts women's humanity and approves of their potential to be the perfect human. In the spiritual realm, there is no gender. Since women were perceived as less human than men, this emphasis of Ibn al-'Arabî is considered "pro-woman".

### Conclusion

As Shaikh indicates, Ibn al-'Arabî's "work is open to multiple readings"<sup>117</sup>, therefore one can read him either as a "feminist" or as a "male chauvinist". I prefer to read him as a "pro-woman" thinker rather than a feminist. Since feminism means supporting gender equality, Ibn al-'Arabî cannot be called a feminist because of his strict gender hierarchy which is also ontological. He likens man-woman relation to God-human relation and places women as inferior in their relation to men. By deriving ontology from social gender mappings, he deepens gender discrimination by moving it to the ontological level. Moreover, his essentialist approach that attributes activity to masculinity and receptivity to femininity is contrary to feminism.

Shaikh concentrates on Ibn Arabî's discourse about humanity and argues that he "fully recognizes the equal agency, ability, and value of men and women" and "spiritual and ontological equality informs social and legal equality"<sup>118</sup>. It appears that Ibn Arabî advocates for "spiritual equality", however, despite the ontological hierarchy

<sup>112</sup> Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 90.

<sup>113</sup> Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 104.

<sup>114</sup> Ibn al-'Arabî, *Dîwân Ibn al-'Arabî* (Cairo: Bülûq, 1855), 54.

<sup>115</sup> Çavuş, "Femininity in Sufism", 359.

<sup>116</sup> Ibn al-'Arabî, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3/87.

<sup>117</sup> Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 203.

<sup>118</sup> Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 93.

he constructed to the detriment of women, it is not possible to say that he is for “ontological equality”. This is an overinterpretation. When it comes to “social equality” his attitude towards women in the social field looks egalitarian, especially in comparison to his contemporaries. However, advocating for “legal equality” is not easy for him because of his commitment to the Qur’ān.

Islamic feminists like Shaikh might focus on Ibn al-'Arabī's pro-woman discourses and make interpretations that would present Ibn al-'Arabī close to feminism, if not a feminist. Their efforts to derive feminist elements from historical figures to ensure gender equality are extremely precious. Knowing that, calling a 13<sup>th</sup>-century thinker “feminist” is above all anachronical, does not mean erasing his pro-woman perspective that might inspire Muslim feminists. Ibn al-'Arabī's insights may not offer a “theoretical guide” but might offer a “methodological guide” for them.

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