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# IBN ARABI AND FRITHJOF SCHUON'S ANDROCENTRIC ONTOLOGY

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Cennet Ceren ÇAVUŞ\*

## Introduction

Ibn Arabi and Frithjof Schuon are Sufi masters from different centuries whose perspectives seem very egalitarian in terms of gender relations. Ibn Arabi, who lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and is known as “the greatest master” (*al-shaykh al-akbar*), consecrates femininity by putting the feminine Essence (*dhât*) at the top of his existential hierarchy. Frithjof Schuon<sup>1</sup>, a 20<sup>th</sup>-century Austrian Sufi metaphysician, who read Ibn Arabi’s philosophy very critically, refers to the feminine aspect of God with the concept of “Eternal Feminine”. While God has been mostly addressed with masculine pronouns throughout the history of religions and deity has been regarded as a masculine attribute<sup>2</sup>, mentioning “the feminine aspect of God” would make Ibn Arabi and Schuon very convenient to be addressed by gender studies scholars. Their approaches to femininity are important to understand the ontology of sex according to Sufism, as well as for serving ideas to the new-age feminist philosophy. Since Ibn Arabi’s approach is counted as a basis for

\* Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Muş Alparslan Üniversitesi İslami İlimler Fakültesi Tasavvuf Bölümü. ORCID: 0000-0002-6042-4273, e-mail: ccerenozturk@gmail.com

1 Frithjof Schuon is one of the early representatives of the Traditionalist School of thought, which is known as Perennialism. In this philosophy, the timeless and universal Divine Truth is expressed in different languages of various religions, which leads to the idea of “transcendental unity of religions”. For further information about Perennialism, see Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*. For further information about Schuon’s philosophy see Çavuş, İbn Arabi ve Schuon: Tasavvufî Metafizik ve Ezeli Hikmet.

2 The number of religions that divinize femininity (Taoism, and Aboriginal and Native American religions) is very few and in polytheistic religions, the proportion and significance of female deities are less than the male ones. For a comparative analysis of various religions’ approaches to femininity see Çavuş, 2021a.

Islamic feminism (Shaikh, 2012: 217), his thoughts on femininity are significant for feminist scholars. Frithjof Schuon is the master of some contemporary Sufi scholars like Seyyed Hossein Nasr who lead the school of Islamic Philosophy at present. Therefore, his explanations of the cosmic order with gender terms are important for the current readers of Islamic Philosophy. I preferred Ibn Arabi and Schuon because they are not only exceptional spiritual personalities but also significant figures who tried to configure metaphysical doctrines by using gendered terminologies.

I analyze Ibn Arabi's and Frithjof Schuon's approaches to femininity through dichotomic conceptualizations they made like activity-passivity, totality-partiality, superiority-inferiority, and essentiality-accidentality and their ideas about the divinity of femininity as well. While all the positive singles of the above dualities are attributed to masculinity, the negative ones are attributed to femininity. Moreover, the relationship between God and the critters is described by the dichotomy between masculinity and femininity which generates an ontological hierarchy between males and females. In this ontology, God is regarded as the masculine pole of the creation process while the critters or the universe, are regarded as "feminine". Everything is feminine in its relation to God because of the "absolutely active" role of God whence femininity means "being other than God"<sup>3</sup>. Despite their pro-feminine discourses which will be mentioned below, the ontological hierarchy Ibn Arabi and Schuon construct makes them ineligible to be regarded as gender-egalitarian scholars.

### **Activity and Passivity**

Both Ibn Arabi and Frithjof Schuon regard activity and passivity as metaphysical concepts through which the universal order is explained. According to Ibn Arabi activity and passivity are relational, and all the active entities are masculine while all the passive entities are feminine (Ibn Arabi, 2013: 4/171). He indicates that God is the absolute active, while all the other things are passive and therefore feminine in their relation to God (Ibn Arabi, 2015: 12/260). According to Frithjof Schuon, although God's perfection possesses both active and passive perfections, for active perfection has priority over the passive one, the masculine always precedes the feminine because of its activity (Schuon, 1970: 129). This way of seeing things inevitably constructs an ontological hierarchy between the masculine and the feminine.

3 Association of world, worldliness, and materiality with femininity; and of spirituality, ethereality, and morality with masculinity is a common tendency in androcentric and misogynistic religious traditions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Judaism (Çavuş, 2021a).

Ibn Arabi brings evidence to this ontological hierarchy from a verse: “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 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: 228). Even though the verse is about divorce, the “degree” that men have above women is the “activity” according to Ibn Arabi. He relates this so-called activity with a hadith narrative which indicates that “Eve is created from Adam’s rib”<sup>4</sup>. Because of this creational relation, Adam had a “degree of priority” over Eve (Ibn Arabi, 2014: 18/303), and Ibn Arabi generalizes this relation to all males and females.<sup>(i)</sup> However, the relationship between the “degree of priority” and the “degree of activity” is ambiguous.

Alongside priority, Ibn Arabi qualifies “a degree” with many adjectives as such: “degree of causality”, “degree of totality”, and “degree of creation” (Ibn Arabi, 2014: 18/303; 2012: 9/171). Although the verse mentions “a degree”, he speaks of different types of degrees referring to the creation narrative. It is said in the Quran “O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women” (al-Nisâ: 1). According to Ibn Arabi, in this narrative the first member of mankind is Adam and his mate Eve was created “from him”. However, the verse indicates that God created humanity from one soul (*nafs*), which is a feminine word in Arabic, and from her (*minha*), her mate (*zavcahâ*) is created.<sup>5</sup> Even though the word is feminine, regarding the word *minha* (from her), Ibn Arabi argues that Eve was created “from Adam”. However, the same word *min* (from) is also used in the same verse to narrate the creation of all humanity “...dispersed from (*min*) both of them many men and women”. As long as all human beings are not “parts” of Adam and Eve, it is absurd to say –referring to this verse- that Eve is a part of Adam. Ibn Arabi does not ground his understanding of the creation narrative on this verse only, he also uses the rib narrative to conclude that, Eve is created from and a part of Adam.

4 “Eve is created from a rib of Adam” is a hadith narrative indicated in many hadith books like Bukhari, Nikah 79; Müslim, Reda 65; Tirmizi, Talak 12; Darimi, Nikah 45; Ahmed b. Hanbel, II/428, 449, 530 and V/164. This narrative is also a verse of the Bible (Genesis 2:22).

5 Arabic is a gendered language in which every single entity is either feminine or masculine.

Ibn Arabi interprets the Quranic creation story with the degrees of “priority”, “causality” and “creation”. Adam is prior to Eve in the creation process and he is the cause of Eve’s existence. Alongside the rib hadith, the degree of totality and more importantly the degree of activity enters the scene. Because of the degree of activity, “woman can never be equal to man, for the passive cannot be equal to the active” (Ibn Arabi, 2015: 12/57). At this point, he constructs an ontological hierarchy between man and woman.

Ibn Arabi indicates that the universe is passive in its relation to God and he associates this fact with woman’s passivity in relation to man (Ibn Arabi, 2015: 12/57). He relates “having the power” to activity and “receptivity of power” to passivity. Power is the power to act and the acted upon is the receptor of the act. Then what is the so-called “action” and what is the activity that makes the man superior to the woman? Ibn Arabi mentions livelihood (*rizq*) here and expresses that the livelihood supplier is superior to the receiver (Ibn Arabi, 2013: 4/171). Since God is the ultimate supplier of livelihood, It<sup>6</sup> is the absolute active for having the power to give what the creatures need. Likewise, men supply livelihood for women, and women are passive in this process while men are actively giving supplies to them. The man is the subject in this relationship while the woman is the object. According to this interpretation of Ibn Arabi, the so-called “action” that makes men superior to women is “giving livelihood”. However, the connection between this type of “activity” and the causality narrated in the rib hadith is uncertain.

Since Ibn Arabi relates the “degree of activity” to the “degree of causality”, which means being the cause of one’s existence, it might be expected that he would consider Mary active in relation to Christ for he doesn’t have a father. However, Ibn Arabi claims that to avoid the woman’s “degree of activity” over man God didn’t make Christ passive in relation to Mary, It rather created Christ for the sake of Gabriel. Gabriel, who was seen as a handsome man by Mary, gave Christ to Mary and Christ became the acted upon of an angel who was in the form of a man (Ibn Arabi, 2015: 12/57). Therefore, there is no way for a woman to be active in her relation to a man, even if she is Mary.

Schuon might be expected to oppose this idea because of the central role he attributed to Mary. In his theology, Mary is a figure that cleans the pejorative image of woman derived from “sinful Eve”. For Schuon “Eve per-

6 “Calling God with a gender pronoun is inevitable in a gendered language like Arabic. Ibn al-Arabī calls God “*huwa*” which means “he” in English. Concerning the internal logic of Islam, God should be called with a genderless pronoun since It is above gender. However, in Arabic, there is not such a pronoun like “it”. Concerning this logic, I call the Islamic God “It” to avoid masculinizing the notion of God.” (Çavuş, 2020: 345)

sonifies the demiurge under its aspect of femininity; Mary is the personification of the *Shekhinah* (tranquility) of the Presence that is both virginal and maternal” (EPW, 143). Mary balances the bad image of Eve since these two female figures in Christianity represent opposite characteristics. While Eve called Adam to the adventure of outwardness, Mary’s function was the opposite, therefore the two images of women reflect the different possibilities of the feminine spirit. (EPW, 142). Schuon sacralizes Mary for being the “merciful Wisdom which descends towards us” (Schuon, 1994: 144), however even if she represents the highest divine perfection, since masculine perfection –for being active- precedes feminine perfection (Schuon, 1970: 129), which is passive, her wisdom can never be “perfect” in the full sense of the word.

Though both Schuon and Ibn Arabi claim that man is active upon woman, they don’t make any clear explanations for the basis of this argument. Therefore, it is not lucent what they mean by “activity”. Nonetheless, Ibn Arabi had two attempts to explain the so-called activity. One is that -not expressing directly- he regards Eve as a receptive place of Adam’s insemination. She is a place of reproduction and a receptive element in the act of copulation. Ibn Arabi likens this relation to God-creatures relation as such: So long as God is the only actor of all acts, the effects of God’s actions take place in creatures as receptive entities of God’s actions. They are acted upon by God and the consequences of God’s actions take place in creatures as the consequence of Adam’s act happens in Eve. “We are a place for God’s actions like Eve is a place for reproduction” (Ibn Arabi, 2009: 11/168). It appears that the act of Adam is insemination and he is perceived as the active element in copulation, whence the fertilization and even the copulation might happen without the woman’s consent since she is receptive and passive in this act because of her physical inferiority. The important point is that, while God is acting upon creatures whether the creatures prefer it or not; they are receptive and passive in their relation to God. Not expressing it openly; by speaking of the activity of man upon woman, Ibn Arabi would possibly imply the active role of man in the act of copulation.<sup>7</sup> This might seem sound; however, generalizing a specific sexual act to the whole existence, or relating the universal order to man’s and woman’s states in sexuality, doesn’t sound reasonable.

Another attempt of Ibn Arabi to explain the discourse of activity is more bizarre than the first. He claims that the reason for man’s priority and there-

7 The “active man-passive woman” discourse can be traced back to Aristotle who mentions “the passive contribution of woman and the active contribution of man to generation” (Allen, 1987: 93).

fore activity above woman is because Eve is created from Adam. However, although Adam is created from clay, Ibn Arabi sees neither a priority nor an activity of clay above Adam. The material of Adam does not make him subordinate in his relation to the clay; but somehow, the material of Eve, namely Adam, makes her subordinate in her relation to Adam. This absurd attitude can be explained by an androcentric approach.

Even though Schuon sees the feminine pole as passive in its relation to masculinity, he doesn't make any explanations about the reason for this categorization. Moreover; he relates femininity not only with passivity and stability; but also, with negativity, illusion, and even evil (Schuon, 1986: 73). It appears that he is affected by the Hindu yin-yang dichotomy which sees the feminine side as "evil" while regarding the masculine side as "good". In Schuon's philosophy, the Hindu *Atma-Maya*<sup>(iii)</sup> dichotomy is crucial and while regarding *Atma*—the Essence of everything, the pure Goodness— as masculine and *Maya*—the created universe, which is the source of all evil— as feminine; he uses a gendered terminology by which male is put in the place of God while the female is seen in place of his servant. This attitude resembles that of Ibn Arabi, who likens God-critters relations to male-female relations. Even if these categorizations are not sociological but ontological and theoretical, they reflect the sociological categorizations concerning gender. Theories are both affected by practices and affect them, therefore the approaches of Ibn Arabi and Frithjof Schuon to the active-passive dichotomy in terms of gender relations, which are affected by their sociological conditions, sustain the present sexual discrimination. Another discourse for sexism is the totality-partiality dichotomy.

### **Totality and Partiality**

The pejoration of femininity is maintained with the totality-partiality dichotomy. For Ibn Arabi man is total and woman is part, and this is the "degree" of man over the woman which makes him superior to her. That is why although a woman can reach perfection (*kamâl*) her perfection is specific, not a total one, because "the part can never be like the total" (Ibn Arabi, 2014: 5/282). This discourse of partiality is a prolongation of the rib narrative. As Eve is created from a part of Adam (his rib), she is the part of the total, namely Adam. In his relation to Eve, Adam is a totality; while being created in the image of God, he is partiality about God. Here again, the man-woman relation is likened to the God-man relation which inevitably creates a deep hierarchical relationship between the two sexes.

“God created Adam in His own image” is a verse from the Bible (Genesis, 1:27) and a hadith narrative as well.<sup>8</sup> This hadith is at the core of Ibn Arabi’s metaphysics, over which he constructs the discourse of the human’s ontological superiority in the universe through the notion of “the perfect human” (*al-insân al-kâmil*)<sup>9</sup>. Being created in the image of God, “men” can achieve all the perfection in the universe. However, while Adam, therefore men are created in the image of God; “Eve is created in the image of Adam” (Ibn Arabi, 2014: 5/282) therefore, Eve is the image of an image and 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. Here springs forth a new sphere of ontological inferiority of the feminine pole. Even if Ibn Arabi claims that man and woman share even the highest level of sainthood (*qutbiyyah*) (Ibn Arabi, 2009: 11/172), the woman is still inferior to man because of the man’s “degree of totality” above woman (Ibn Arabi, 2014: 5/282).

Schuon is like-minded with Ibn Arabi on the “total-part” dichotomy. He argues that the integral femininity corresponds to a “part” and not to a “totality” (Schuon, 1990b: 45). Moreover, Schuon explains the gendered language of the Semitic Monotheism with the same dichotomy: “God is totality and not part, and this totality has its image, precisely, in the human male” (Schuon, 1970: 129). The gendered language of the Semitic religions might be explained by the structure of their languages. For instance, Arabic does not have a genderless pronoun like “it”, therefore God should be addressed with either a male or a female pronoun. It is not likely to call God “she” in a patriarchal society because of Its hierarchical superiority so It was called “He”. In other words, God is addressed with the masculine pronoun because of a linguistic necessity. However, Schuon interprets a linguistic fact as ontological.<sup>10</sup> Even though he criticizes the dehumanization of women through the pejorative image of Eve and argues that not only Adam but also Eve was created in the image of God and consequently a woman is divine for having a human form (EPW, 135-6), he argues that God’s totality has its image in the human male, not female. So long as Adam’s state of being created in the

8 Bukhârî, İstizan 1; Müslim, Bir 115.

9 The notion of “al-insân al-kâmil” indicates human beings’ superiority over other creatures because of its ontological function in the process of creation. For more information about this Notion see Takeshita, 1987.

10 Sachiko Murata, who is the author of *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought*, embraces the active male-receptive female template in her so-called “feminist agenda” and argues that “If Muslims call God “He,” it is because the first and most necessary relationship of human beings to God is submission (islam). We are receptive and He is active” (Murata, 1992: 324).



image of God is generalized for all men, Adam is not perceived as a prototype for humankind, but only for "mankind". Even though Schuon regards the so-called "priority" as relative or even non-existent, he argues that the male is total while the female is part. Trying to avoid hierarchical gender relations, he notes that "it is indeed important to understand that the male is not totality in the same way that God is, and likewise that woman is not 'part' in an absolute manner, for each sex, being equally human, shares in the nature of the other." (Schuon, 1970: 129) Despite this egalitarian-looking discourse; by calling man total and woman part, he insinuates the idea that human means man, not the woman. This way of looking at sex leads to the dehumanization of the female sex, which is fed not only by the totality-partiality dichotomy but also by the dichotomy of "superiority-inferiority".

### **Superiority and Inferiority**

Ibn Arabi speaks of woman's ontological inferiority, while Schuon speaks of femininity's inferiority. Ibn Arabi sees femininity's ontological inferiority as evidence of the woman's innate inferiority. On the other hand, Schuon avoids making sociologically androcentric remarks on the scale of gender. He is rather inclined to take the hierarchical sexual relations out of the social field and restrain them to the ontological sphere.

According to Ibn Arabi, the superiority of man above woman is the "degree of creation", which means being created before the woman and being the material origin of her. However; despite Adam being created from clay, for Ibn Arabi, the clay does not have a "degree of creation" which would make the clay superior to Adam. It is interesting to see that Ibn Arabi likens the clay-Adam relationship to the Adam-Eve relationship and states that since Adam's state of being created from the clay does not harm his perfection (*kamâl*), Eve's state of being created from Adam does not prevent her from reaching perfection (Ibn Arabi, 2014: 5/371). Despite this position, according to Ibn Arabi, even though a woman reaches perfection, she cannot reach it like a man does, because of the so-called "degree of creation" (Ibn Arabi, 2013: 9/171). According to his analogy, the clay should have been superior to Adam, therefore to all men, for being the material substance of Adam. However, this way of thinking is quite out of the question in Ibn Arabi's philosophy. Moreover, in Islam Satan is blamed for comparing his matter to that of Adam's and seeing himself as superior to him. Therefore, in this context, Ibn Arabi's approach is the same as Satan's for claiming superiority by appealing to the material substance.

Ibn Arabi also claims that men are superior to women because of the prophethood mission of men (Ibn Arabi, 2009: 11/168). Since a female prophet cannot be effective in a patriarchal society for she would remain underestimated and not taken seriously. The so-called “superiority” of men deriving from the mission of prophethood is a sociological one rather than ontological. Except for “not being prophets”, all the inferiority discourse of Ibn Arabi is constructed upon the degree (*daracah*), which he called in many forms like “degree of activity”, “degree of priority”, “degree of causality”, “degree of totality” and “degree of creation”. All of these denominations are based on the creation narratives as we touched upon above.

There is another analogy through which Ibn Arabi tries to base his discourse on the superiority of man over woman. While interpreting the verse “The creation of the heavens and earth is greater than the creation of mankind, but most of the people do not know” (al-Mu’min: 57), he states that “the degree that makes heavens and earth superior to man is the same degree that makes man superior to woman” (Ibn Arabi, 2009: 11/167). He explains this superiority again with activity, claiming that man is passive in relation to the heavens and earth. However, he doesn’t mention how and why the heavens and earth are active upon man. The interesting point is that even though the heavens and earth’s “degree of activity” above man do not make them more perfect in the eyes of Ibn Arabi; the same degree makes the man more perfect than the woman. This inconsistency reveals the gaps in his thought about the connection between “being created from” and “inferiority”.

Another way to show the gaps in Ibn Arabi’s approach to inferiority is through his contradictory statements. On the one hand, he indicates that the “degree” of man above woman is because of Eve’s being created from Adam. He says “when Eve sprung forth from Adam, he had the degree of priority over her” (Ibn Arabi, 2014: 18/303). On the other hand, he mentions the opposite by saying “the reason of the degree here is not Eve’s springing forth from Adam, but the woman is a locus of receptivity” (Ibn Arabi, 2013: 9/171). Moreover, he criticizes people who claim that the reason for Adam’s superiority over Eve is causality by giving the creation of Christ from Mary as proof of the reverse. Whence Christ is created from Mary, the degree of man above woman cannot be causality, he claims. However; in another passage, to defend the degree of man above woman, he claims that Christ is created for the sake of Gabriel -not Mary- who appeared as a handsome man and Christ became the acted-upon of a man-formed angel, rather than his mother (Ibn Arabi, 2015: 12/57). According to this statement, Christ is not

inferior to Mary because he is not created from her, but from an angel who was formed like a man, but according to another statement Christ is created from Mary. These inconsistent statements indicate that Ibn Arabi's ideas on the reason for superiority are not clear.

Despite the ambiguity of the discourse of superiority deriving from activity, Ibn Arabi is sure about the ontological superiority of man above woman. This idea of superiority is strengthened by likening the man-woman relation to the God-creatures relation. He likens divine command – nature relationship to that of man- woman. The woman is the sphere where children spring forth, while nature is the locus where substances spring forth. He claims that without nature nothing would exist with the divine command, both divine command and nature are needed for existence: “There can be no command without nature and no nature without command” (Ibn Arabi, 2009: 11/174). Although he stresses the reciprocity between the divine command and nature, therefore the men and the women, masculinity is inarguably superior to femininity since the divine command is superior to nature.

Ibn Arabi attributes ontological superiority to men over women by interpreting the famous verse: “Men are the managers (*qawwâm*) of women, because of the advantage Allah has granted some of them over others, and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth” (al-Nisâ: 34). According to him, women are families of men, which means that they need men, as “all the creatures are family of God”,<sup>11</sup> in other words in need of God (Ibn Arabi, 2011: 16/295). This means that God stands over (*qâ'im*)<sup>12</sup> or takes care of every soul just as men stand over (*qawwâm*) women (Murata, 1992: 178). He likens creatures' needs in God to women's needs in men. In this way, Ibn Arabi's effort to explain everything with God-universe relation manifests itself in the domain of man-woman relation. This approach of explaining universal relations with gendered terms or reversely explaining gender relations with theological realities, is the most effective way of constructing a deep and a rock-solid hierarchical relationship between the sexes.

## Essentiality and Accidentality

Like Ibn Arabi, Frithjof Schuon uses gendered terms to explain his ontology. Essence-accident categorization is one of the most important instruments for explaining the universal order according to Schuon. The main concepts of his metaphysics *Atma* and *Maya*, which are terms from Hinduism, are

11 Ibn Arabi mentions this sentence as a hadith of the Prophet Mohammad, but we could not find its origin.

12 The word “*qawwâm*” in the verse above is from the same root as the word “*qâ'im*”.

the basis of his essence-accident categorization. *Atma* is the absolute Essence that desires to be manifested because of its inherent goodness and “it breathes through *Maya*” (Schuon, 2002: 41). *Maya* is the manifestation of *Atma*, therefore *Atma* is *Maya*, and also *Maya* is *Atma*’s prolongation, therefore it is the “other” of *Atma*. The main universal dichotomy between *Atma* and *Maya* gives rise to all kinds of other universal dichotomies such as good-evil, absolute-relative, real-illusory, positive-negative, active-passive, dynamic-static, masculine-feminine, as well as above-below and right-left. *Atma* represents the positive poles of these dichotomies including masculinity, while *Maya* includes the negative poles including femininity.

While putting *Atma* as the Absolute, Schuon gives Infinitude to *Maya* as a feminine element that makes femininity divine in his eyes. Infinitude is the complement of the Absolute and the source of all relativities because of the All-Possibility aspect of *Maya*, while *Atma* is the Necessary Being which is the source and essence of everything (Schuon, 1986: 74). Moreover, Schuon sees the Absolute as a “pole” in its relation to the Infinite. Rigor, as well as Justice and Wrath, is derived from the Absolute pole; while Gentleness, together with Compassion and Love, is derived from the Infinite (Schuon, 1986: 33). This is the expression of God’s two main qualities, namely majesty (*jalâl*) and beauty (*jamâl*) in Sufi tradition (which will be explained below), and Schuon attributes femininity to God’s names concerning Its beauty and attributes masculinity to Its majestic names. He regards universal femininity, -All-Possibility<sup>13</sup>- as a prolongation of the Necessary being, -*Atma*- the ontologically masculine pole which means that masculine is the Essence and feminine is the accident. This is the same approach that Ibn Arabi indicates while mentioning the “degree of creation”. Adam, -being the essence of Eve and therefore her whole and reason for her existence- is superior to Eve; as the masculine *Atma* is superior to feminine *Maya* in respect of everything. By imposing the Essence -*Atma*- as masculine and the prolongation of it -*Maya*- as feminine, he repeats the ancient discourse of priority and superiority of the masculine pole over the feminine.

Another way Schuon joined in the ancient discourse of priority is by explaining the universe with degrees. According to him, there are four degrees in the universal order: Beyond-Being, Being/God, Heaven, and Earth. The first two -Beyond-Being and Being- taken together constitute the Divine Principle; while Heaven and Earth constitute the universal Manifestation

13 It is interesting to see that Amir Abd al-Kâder, who is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Sufi following the path of Ibn Arabi, depicts “woman as such” as the locus of manifestation of the degree of receptivity, which is none other than the “degree of possibilities” (Geoffroy, 2016: 58).

(Schuon, 1990a: 116). As might be expected, Schuon indicates that the first two of the degrees represent the active and divinely masculine pole, while the last two represent the passive and divinely feminine pole. All the universal dichotomies in Schuon's metaphysics are connected with masculinity and femininity by giving the essential role to the masculine pole and the accidental role to the feminine. So long as even the God itself comprises poles, it has an aspect of femininity and therefore the feminine pole necessarily has a divine aspect, which is mentioned by Schuon as "Infinitude/Eternity".

### **The Eternal Feminine/Deiformity<sup>14</sup>**

The divinity of femininity is expressed by Schuon with a borrowed notion from Goethe: "the eternal feminine". This expression was established by Goethe in his *Faust* to refer to the woman's innate characteristic of "selfless love". He employs the concept as a symbol of intuitional power that elevates man to eternal redemption with love. The eternal feminine discourse has different forms like the sanctity of the mother, the purity of the virgin, and the fecundity of the womb.<sup>15</sup>

Schuon states that "the 'eternal feminine' represents God's Goodness in itself, in as much as "it forgives, welcomes, and unifies, by freeing us from formal and other hardenings." (Schuon, 1981a: 43) According to the above sentence, femininity by representing the goodness of God represents forgiveness, easiness, and reintegrativeness. In Christianity Virgin Mary is the manifestation of the "eternal feminine" for Schuon because of her attributes that represent goodness. He identifies femininity with beauty and virtue (Schuon, 1982a: 34), and referring to Rumi he expresses that the feminine body is an image of the creative power of God (Schuon, 1981b: 69)<sup>16</sup>.

According to Schuon, every religion, directly or indirectly integrates the feminine element namely, the eternal feminine, into its system necessarily. He states that "Christianity in practice deifies the Mother of Christ, ... Islam for its part, and beginning with the Prophet, has consecrated femininity, on the basis of a metaphysics of deiformity" (Schuon, 1994: 227-228).<sup>[iii]</sup> For

14 Deiformity means being in the image of God.

15 <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/secondsex/motifs/> (accessed on 24.04.2022). This concept can be criticized from a feminist perspective for having "gender essentialism" which assumes different core essences for males and females.

16 Rumi states that "the sage is conquered by a woman whereas the fool conquers her". Schuon argues that the sage is conquered by the woman whereas the fool conquers her because "the latter is brutalized by his passion, and does not know the *barakah* (benediction) of love and delicate sentiments, whereas the sage sees in the lovable woman a ray from God, and in the feminine body an image of creative Power" (Schuon, 1981b: 69).

Schuon woman “being situated like the male in the human state, is deiform because this state is deiform” (Schuon, 1982b: 89). He regards the human state as deiform, not only the “man state” but also the “woman state”. For him, humanity is common in man and woman and both of them as “humans” are deiform because of being created in the image of God.

Unlike Schuon, who regards both man and woman as deiform, Ibn Arabi argues that only man is created in the image of God, and woman is created in the image of man. As indicated before, Ibn Arabi argues that woman is “the image of the image of God”, in other words, the image of Adam rather than the image of God. In his ontology man is at the center while the woman is a perfecting element for him by being a place for the man to witness God through understanding his position in relation to It and Its position in relation to him.

In Ibn Arabi’s ontology, concerning God-man-woman ternary, God is the absolute active while the woman is absolutely passive. However, man is both active and passive; he is active in relation to the woman while he is passive in relation to God. In his intercourse with the woman, he can realize his passivity in front of God by witnessing the woman’s passivity, at the same time he can realize God’s activity by being active upon the woman. He says “When the man witnesses the Real in the woman, this is witnessing within a locus that receives activity. When he witnesses It (the Real) in himself in respect to the fact that the woman becomes manifest from himself, then he has witnessed It in an agent. When he witnesses It in himself without calling to mind the form of that which was engendered from himself, then this witnessing of the Real in the woman is the most complete and the most perfect since he witnessed the Real in respect to the fact that It is both agent and locus of receiving activity.” (Ibn Arabi, 2010: 282) As a locus of witnessing God in the most complete and the most perfect sense, the woman is a perfective element for man. That is why the Prophet says “Women were made lovable to me”. This expression, which is the pillar of Ibn Arabi’s sexual ontology, is a hadith narrative.

According to the hadith authorities, the original narrative of the hadith is “From your world women and perfume were made lovable to me, and the freshness of my eyes is in prayer”<sup>17</sup>. However, Ibn Arabi narrates it as “From your world, three things were made lovable to me, women, perfume,

17 (Kenzu'l-Ummal, No: 18913; Camiu's-Sağır 1/146, Ahmed ,11845, Nesei, VII,61,62, 3878; İbn Sa'd, 1, 398; el-Hakim, el-Mustedrak)

and the freshness of my eyes/my comfort is in prayer"<sup>18</sup>. Depending on the feminine form of the word "three" in the narrative he refers to, he argues that femininity has a degree over masculinity. In Arabic, if there is even just one masculine entity among many feminine ones, the masculine pronoun is used to indicate the cluster of entities. However, in the narrative above, even though the word perfume is a masculine one, the suffix in the word "three" indicates femininity. This fact is contrary to the structure of the Arabic language and Ibn Arabi argues that the Prophet used the feminine suffix on purpose to mention the degree of femininity over masculinity. However, he doesn't explain what he means by that degree.

The value of femininity for Ibn Arabi is its function in the cosmic order. It is a locus for creation. Since God needs creatures to actualize Its aspect of "activity", man needs the woman to be active. He states "woman is a locus for creation. Man is active because of the image in which he is created, therefore there is inevitably a place to act upon. ... The perfection of man can only be realized in the woman who is made a place by God. The woman is a part of the man that is from him and acted upon by him. That is why women are made lovable to the perfect man." (Ibn Arabi, 2015: 14/153) In this passage, Ibn Arabi claims that the prophet's love for the woman is because of the woman's perfective function. Here arises this question: How does being active or acting upon a woman make a man perfect?

Ibn Arabi relates perfection to copulation. According to him, sexual interaction is the most straightforward way to reach unity with God. That is why the love for women is a prophetic heir and a part of the gnostic's perfection (Ibn Arabi, 2015: 7/237). During the sexual intercourse, man understands God's active position in relation to himself through understanding his position in relation to the woman, therefore he realizes how it is to be like God. According to Ibn Arabi, the reason for man's desire for sexual union is the separation of his rib during the creation of Eve from Adam. Men's yearning for women is a yearning for themselves. He states: "God filled the place from which Eve was created with a hunger for her since existence does not allow a vacuum to remain. When It filled the vacuum with air (*hawâ*)<sup>19</sup>, he felt towards her a yearning as towards himself. Because she is a part of him, and she felt a yearning towards him because he is her homeland, from which she originated. So Eve's love is the love of homeland and Adam's love is the love of himself". (Ibn Arabi, 1911: 1/124). For Ibn Arabi, the reason why a woman

18 Some hadith scholars narrate the hadith with the Word "three". (Aliyyu'l-Karî, Kubra, 313; Aclunî, Keşfu'l Hafa; 2/287)

19 *Hawwâ* which is a close word to "*hawâ*" means Eve in Arabic.



loves a man is that she was created from him. Then what is the function of the man for woman in witnessing God or reaching perfection? While men can see God through women during copulation and reach perfection, what is the function of copulation for women? The answers to these questions are absent in Ibn Arabi's system.

Ibn Arabi's ontology of sexuality is deficient for excluding woman's deformity. That is why while copulation is a key to perfection, he does not state anything about the perfection of women through sexuality. Moreover, his discourse of perfection strengthens the ontological hierarchy between sexes. He says: "The reason for the passivity of the woman in relation to man is to provide man's love to the one who makes him lord. Man loves a woman because she makes him a lord while woman loves man as a part who loves its total" (Ibn Arabi, 2014: 5/281). Ibn Arabi here again likens man-woman relation to God-man relation and gives a God-like position to man. The love of man is because of woman's passivity, like the love of God for the creatures is because they are a place upon which God is active (Ibn Arabi, 2014: 18/203). With the different kinds of loves of man and woman, their loves ended up in sexual union in which man sees himself in his image -woman- as an active element like God. This is the zenith of perfection. However, a woman, with her "love to her total", cannot see any image of herself, therefore can't see herself and reach the top of perfection as a man does. This picture of sexuality is drawn for men and does not indicate a spiritual benefit for women.

Schuon approves of Ibn Arabi's picture of sexuality and finds it Tantric and Shaktic<sup>20</sup> (Schuon, 1991: 42). He repeats Ibn Arabi's discourse on the woman's perfective function as a locus of witnessing God by saying "woman is Beauty, or the attractive and liberating vision of God in forms that manifest Him or that manifest His radiant Goodness" (Schuon, 1981a: 43). However, unlike Ibn Arabi, who argues that a man's love for a woman is a love for its part, and a woman's love for a man is a love for its total, Schuon describes the attraction between man and woman by the concepts that he uses to describe the structure of universal order: Absolute and Infinite. He says "In loving woman, man tends unconsciously towards the Infinite... just as woman, in loving man, tends in reality towards the Absolute" (Schuon, 1991: 43). The universal order is sustained by the dance of *Atma* and *Maya*, Absolute and Infinite, masculine and feminine. The feminine element is the creative

20 In Tantric and Shaktic yoga, sex is a meditative activity in which the end goal is not orgasm but spiritual transformation and enlightenment. (Medical News Today: <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/what-is-tantric-sex#definition>, accessed on 24.04.2022)



one, without which the absoluteness would not manifest itself. It comprises many possibilities for creation and the universe needs femininity for its existence, as the Absolute needs Infinity for its manifestation. Despite its "existence-giving" role, *Maya*/Infinity is the prolongation of *Atma*/Absolute, which is essential, therefore, femininity is subordinate to masculinity in this ontology.

Even if the Absolute is ontologically superior to the Infinite, since both absoluteness and infinity are attributes of God, Schuon's picture of sexuality is less androcentric and more egalitarian in comparison to that of Ibn Arabi's. Rather than likening the man-woman relationship to the God-human relationship, he regards divine principles as both feminine and masculine. However, even though for him unlimitedness of the divine principle, which is feminine, is superior to the logical and justice-centered aspect of the masculine pole (Schuon, 1982b: 95); when taken on its own, masculinity is always prior and superior to femininity, even if it is eternal.

### The Feminine Aspect of God

Both Ibn Arabi and Frithjof Schuon emphasize the feminine aspect of God by expressing the femininity of some important words, which are core to their metaphysics. Ibn Arabi uses the words *dhât* (essence) and *sifah* (attribute) to configure his ontology, and these words, which indicate God on different existential levels, are feminine. It is important to note that the Essence (*dhât*) is ontologically superior to God in Ibn Arabi's metaphysical doctrine.<sup>21</sup> For him, the femininity of the word *dhât* is enough to show the superiority of femininity (Ibn Arabi, 2009: 11/173). Moreover, making an etymological analysis, he argues that the woman has a degree above the man because of the additional letter in the word "woman". In Arabic man is called *mar'* and a woman is called *mar'a* with an additional letter, which compensates for the woman's lack that arose from the degree which man has above woman (Ibn Arabi, 2009: 11/173). Also, Schuon expresses that in Arabic and other languages, the theophanies<sup>22</sup> such as *barakah* (benediction), *sakînah* (the real presence), and *haqîqah* (the esoteric truth) are all feminine names (Schuon, 1984: 194). Since the esoteric truth (*haqîqah*) is the Essence Itself the ultimate truth is feminine, which demonstrates God's femininity. In addition to that Schuon's doctrine of the eternal feminine, which was previously addressed, indicates the feminine aspect of God. However, neither Ibn Arabi

21 For a brief outlook of Ibn Arabi's metaphysics see Çavuş, 2021b.

22 Theophany means "appearance of God" and it "refers to the temporal and spatial manifestation of God in some tangible forms" (Harvey, 1964: 241).

nor Schuon explains the sort of priority, which is up to God's denomination by feminine words.

Some interpreters of Ibn Arabi like Sayyed Hossein Nasr and Sachiko Murata argue that in the Islamic perspective femininity represents God's beauty (*jamâl*) while masculinity represents God's majesty (*jalâl*). In Ibn Arabi's ontology, God is known through the divine names, and some divine names like Beautiful, Near, Merciful, Compassionate, Loving, Gentle, Forgiving, Pardon-er, Life-giver, Enricher, and Bestower indicate God's mercy (*rahmah*) and similarity (*tashbîh*) to the creatures while some others like Mighty, Inaccessible, Great, Majestic, Compeller, Creator, Proud, High, King, Wrathful, Avenge, Slayer, Depriver, and Harmer indicate Its wrath (*ghazâb*) and incomparability (*tanzîh*) (Murata, 1992: 9). For him to reach perfection, one should be aware of not only God's similarity but also of Its incomparability.

Depending on the above conceptualization of Ibn Arabi, Schuon's explanation of God with the concepts of Absolute and Infinite, and his association of femininity with beauty and masculinity with majesty, Nasr argues that the divine names manifest in genders as follows: "God is both Absolute and Infinite. Absoluteness and Majesty, which are inseparable from it, are manifested most directly in the masculine state, and Infinity and Beauty in the feminine state. The male body itself reflects majesty, power, absoluteness, and the female body beauty, beatitude, and infinity" (Nasr, 1987: 49). He repeats Schuon's association of femininity with infinity and of masculinity with absoluteness. As Sadiyya Shaikh pointedly expresses, Nasr dichotomizes God's qualities in gender-specific ways and his argument about gender-specific manifestations of the divine names is contrary to Ibn Arabi's understanding of gender (Shaikh, 2012: 205). God's qualities of majesty and beauty were not related to gender in Ibn Arabi's philosophy.

Nasr's disciple Murata, who wrote the first book on gender relations in Ibn Arabi's philosophy, *The Tao of Islam*, constructs her whole argument on the majesty-beauty dichotomy. She relates Ibn Arabi's ontology to Taoism and explains the so-called *jamâl-jalâl* dichotomy with yang and yin of Taoist philosophy. In that understanding of gender, yin -the dark side- represents the female while yang -the bright side- represents the male. She declares that she feels "no difficulty in naming the overpowering, masculine, jalâl aspect as yang and the loving-kind, beautiful, jamâl aspect as yin" (Murata, 1992: viii). However, Ibn Arabi never associates the names of wrath or majesty with masculinity and the names of mercy or beauty with femininity. On the contrary, he associates power, which is a majestic attribute, with women.

He argues that the woman is the most powerful of the creatures. In an environment where the power is identified with men, he makes his claim about the power of women by over-interpreting the verse about the two wives of the Prophet Mohammad: "If the two of you turn in repentance to Allah (that is better for you), for the hearts of both of you have swerved from the straight path. But if you support one another against the Prophet, then surely Allah is his Protector; and after that Gabriel and all righteous believers and the angels are all his supporters" (at-Tahrîm: 4). Depending on the call for the assistance of God, Gabriel, and the believers against two women, wives of the Prophet – 'Āishah and Hafsâ, Ibn Arabi claims that women are so powerful (Ibn Arabi, 2013: 9/157). He argues that because of the outstanding power of these women, God mentioned that God, Gabriel, the believers, and the angels are helpers of the Prophet. This quite literal interpretation is unique in the Islamic tradition.

Ibn Arabi's exceptional interpretations of women do not pertain to the power issue. He continues to make claims about woman's superiority by reversing the patriarchal paradigm on the witnessing of women. There is a verse concerning witnessing in the Quran as follows: "O believers! When you contract a loan for a fixed period, commit it to writing. ... Call upon two of your men to witness. If two men cannot be found, then one man and two women of your choice will witness -so if one of the women forgets the other may remind her..." (al-Baqarah, 282). This verse, which is read in modern times as evidence of the lack of women's rights in Islam, was interpreted by many Muslim thinkers as the lack of intelligence in women. However, contrary to the mainstream understanding of the verse, Ibn Arabi asserts that in some cases the witnessing of one woman is equal to two men's witnessing (Ibn Arabi, 2009: 11/171). Although these cases pertained to women, such as menstruation and waiting period to remarry after divorce, claiming that the men's position in witnessing is situational rather than essential was revolutionary in his period.

Ibn Arabi's view about women's sainthood is revolutionary too. According to him, femininity has no inferiority to masculinity concerning spirituality, so women share every level of spirituality including "polehood" (*qutbiyyah*) which is the top level of sainthood. When he defines "Perfect Human", he points out that this is for both males and females (Çavuş, 2020: 359). He had many female masters, as well as disciples, and 14 of his 15 disciples to whom he invested *khirqā*<sup>23</sup> (cardigan) were women (Chodkiewicz, 1994: 16).

23 "Investiture of *khirqā*" is a symbol for the transition of states and spiritual knowledge to the disciple.

Mentioning the feminine aspect of God, regarding woman as the most powerful of the creatures, defending the equivalence of one woman's testimony to that of two men, and many other patriarchy-breaking acts and thoughts of Ibn Arabi, make him a spring for Islamic feminism.<sup>[iv]</sup> However, since Ibn Arabi constructs an ontological inequality and a strict hierarchy by likening man to God and woman to the cosmos it is not plausible to picture him as a feminist (Çavuş, 2020: 359).

## Conclusion

Whether used by feminists or not, Ibn Arabi's ontology is quite androcentric and serves for deepening the present non-proportional gender relations. Not only a 13th-century Andalusian Sufi master but also a 20th-century Austrian metaphysician widen hierarchical sexual relationships with his ontology. Even though they are the "top egalitarian" Sufi masters who constructed deep and impressing ontologies and spoke of the feminine aspect of God, they sustain the androcentric approach to sex by embracing the ancient discourse of "active man-passive woman". In dichotomies they elaborated to explain their metaphysics -such as "active-passive", "total-part", "superior-inferior", and "essence-accident"-, they attribute all the favorable sides to the masculine pole while attributing the unfavorable sides to the feminine. They base their ontologies on the feminine-masculine dichotomy and put the woman in her relation to man as a servant by likening man's relation with the woman to God's relation with man.

It should be mentioned that Ibn Arabi's revolutionary ideas about women are ahead not only of his time but also of Islamic societies' mentality today (Çavuş, 2020: 353). Also, Frithjof Schuon hesitates to draw sociological conclusions from the ontological inferiority of women in his thought. However, they transport the sociological domination of men over women to the metaphysical sphere by deriving ontology from sociology, which ends up putting men in the place of God in their relation to women. Concerning the deep effects of ontological perspectives on all the human fields; discourses as such would have fearsome effects on human societies by promoting men to act like Gods in their relations to women.

For better societies in terms of gender relations, humans need new ontologies that would question the present metaphysical interpretations and replace them with pro-human perspectives rather than the pro-man ones.

- [i] Ibn Arabi's interpretation of this hadith is unique for the sake of the meaning he gives to the word "rib". For him, the curve of the rib is its straightforwardness because of its function of protection. As a rib protects the organs within it for the sake of its cavity, the woman is inclined to her husband and children for protecting them (Ibn Arabi, 2014: 5/283).
- [ii] In Sanskrit *Atma* or *Atman* means "the real or true Self", while *Maya* means "artifice, illusion" (Cutsinger, 2006: 181).
- [iii] He points out that Islam consecrates this femininity by symbolizing the woman's secrecy with the veil (Schuon, 1994: 228). Woman incarnates esoteric truth; therefore, she is veiled like the *haqîqah*—the Truth— is veiled in Islamic esoterism (Schuon, 1972: 37).
- [iv] Sadiyya Shaikh in her book *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy Ibn Arabi, Gender and Sexuality* offers Ibn Arabi's ideas as a basis for Islamic feminism (pp. 203-228).

## Abstract

Ibn Arabi's philosophy has been addressed by some scholars as a source of Islamic feminism because of his revolutionary ideas and practices concerning women. In his ontology, he consecrates femininity by putting the feminine Essence (*dhât*) at the top of his existential hierarchy. Frithjof Schuon, who reads Ibn Arabi's philosophy very critically, refers to the feminine aspect of God with the concept of "Eternal Feminine". At the first sight, both thinkers seem to have very egalitarian perspectives in terms of gender relations. However, are their ontologies really pro-feminine? This paper discusses the two Sufis' understandings of femininity, masculinity, and "God's femininity" in detail with a critical method. I argue that by adopting the ancient "active man-passive woman" discourse Ibn Arabi and Schuon construct their ontologies on the feminine-masculine dichotomy and establish a hierarchy to the detriment of femininity. In dichotomies they elaborated to explain their metaphysics -such as "active-passive", "total-part", "superior-inferior", and "essence-accident"-, they attribute all the favorable sides to masculinity while attributing the unfavorable sides to femininity. Moreover, Ibn Arabi puts men in the place of God in their relation to women while Schuon regards men as the image of God's totality, not women. Therefore, even though they have some discourses consecrating femininity, their ontologies are quite androcentric since they sustain the actual pro-masculine approach to sex.

**Keywords:** Ibn Arabi, Frithjof Schuon, Sufism, Femininity, Gender, Ontology, Androcentrism

## Öz

### İbn Arabi ve Frithjof Schuon'un Androsantrik Ontolojisi

Kadınlarla ilgili devrimsel fikir ve uygulamaları sebebiyle İbn Arabi'nin felsefesi bazı araştırmacılar tarafından İslamî feminizm için bir kaynak olarak görülmektedir. Nitekim o ontolojisinde, varlık hiyerarşisinin en üst seviyesine dışı olan Zât'ı koyarak dişliliği kutsamaktadır. İbn Arabi'yi eleştirel bir okumaya tabi tutan Frithjof Schuon ise Tanrı'nın dişil yönüne "Ebedi Dişi" kavramı ile işaret etmektedir. İlk bakışta bu iki düşünürün cinsiyet ilişkilerine yaklaşımı eşitlikçi gibi görünmektedir. Fakat onların ontolojileri gerçekten de dişilik lehtarı mıdır? Bu çalışma iki düşünürün erillik, dişilik ve "Tanrı'nın dişliliği" anlayışları eleştirel bir yöntem ile detaylı bir biçimde tartışmaktadır. Çalışmada İbn Arabi ve Schuon'un, kadim "aktif erkek-pasif kadın" söylemini benimseyerek, ontolojilerini dişil-eril ikiliği üzerine kurduğu ve dişilik aleyhine bir hiyerarşi ürettiği iddia edilmektedir. Metafizik doktrinlerini açıklamak için kullandıkları "aktif-pasif", "bütün-parça", "üstün-aşağı", "asıl-ilinek" karşıtlıklarındaki olumlu sıfatları erillığe atfederken, olumsuz sıfatları dişiliğe atfettikleri görülmektedir. Bununla beraber İbn Arabi erkeği kadınla ilişkisinde Tanrı yerine koymakta, Schuon ise sadece erkeği Tanrı'nın bütünselliğinin sureti olarak görmektedir. Bu nedenle, her ne kadar dişliliği kutsayan söylemleri olsa da mevcut eril lehtarı cinsiyet yaklaşımlarının devam ettirmeleri sebebiyle İbn Arabi ve Schuon'un ontolojileri antroposantriktir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İbn Arabi, Frithjof Schuon, Tasavvuf, Kadın, Cinsiyet, Ontoloji, Androsantrizm

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