



The Image of Woman in the Islamic Philosophical Tradition*

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Research Article

Submitted: 04.11.2018 | Accepted: 14.12.2018

Abstract: In the Islamic philosophical tradition, it seems that the image of woman has not been studied very much and the role of woman has hardly ever mentioned. First, we will briefly explain why we chose the concept of imagination. Afterward, from which sources the Islamic philosophical tradition has formed its concepts, and as a result, we would try to talk about where it established philosophy, whether it was theoretical or practical. Finally, we want to finish the subject by giving examples from the fact of women in Islamic philosophical tradition.

Keywords: Islamic philosophical tradition, Ancient Greek philosophy, the image of woman, conception, metaphysics, principles.

* This paper is the translation of the proceeding presented in the *International Workshop on Islam and Woman* at Iğdır University, Iğdır, July 9th, 2018.

Introduction

The Islamic philosophical tradition took the concept of imagination or *taḥayyul* from the Ancient Greek philosophical tradition, especially from Aristotle, the founder of the Peripatetic school. Imagination is used to imagine a thing or being, to revive a mind or to transform a phenomenon into a metaphysical concept.¹ It would be appropriate to say that the image of the woman in the Islamic philosophical tradition is presented as a phenomenon imagined in mind as a continuation of the Ancient Greek philosophical tradition, and consequently, that its connections with reality are only expressed in the mind depending on metaphysical principles.

In Islamic society, as revealed in the social life of that day, it should say that the social situation of woman has not affected too much, her conditions should be represented only through a set of principles and concepts. Tradition in Islamic philosophy more likely passed through us from Ancient Greek, although some extent influenced by Islamic culture and tradition, philosophers interpreted it in conjunction with the Ancient Greek philosophical tradition. In other words, we see that some concepts and structures created in the Ancient Greek philosophical tradition have been presented as an element of Islamic religion, under the influence of Platonism, especially Neo-Platonism, by reconciling with Islam.

The Background of the Subject

Ancient Greek philosophy has three different contributions in Islamic philosophical tradition. These are Pythagoreanism, Platonism and Aristotelianism. It seems that Pythagoreanism does not take much part in the Islamic philosophical tradition,

¹ The word Greek *phantasia* was translated into Arabic as *taḥayyul* or *ḥayāl*. See Aristotle, *De Anima (On the Soul)*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin Books, 1986), III.3; al-Fārābī, *Ārā' Ahl al-Madīna al-Fāḍila*, ed. Albert Naṣrī Nādir (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1985), 114-6; Averroes, *Talkhīṣ Kitāb an-Nafs*, ed. Alfred L. Ivry (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A'lā fi ath-Thaqāfa, 1994), 116-20.

except that is effective on al-Kindī and Abū Bakr al-Rāzī or on Ikhwān al-Şafā in the Ismaili tradition.² We can say that there has not much of place for the woman in this school. When we speak of the point of view of Islamic moral philosophical tradition to the woman, especially of al-Kindī and al-Rāzī, we cannot say to be mentioned as a good being.

It is obvious that the Islamic philosophical tradition originally represented a metaphysical and conceptual structure. In other words, it is based woman upon certain concepts that created in minds than practice. It is understood in Islamic philosophy that we should look at not only the woman but other social events or worldly things from this theoretical point of view. Metaphysics, in particular, is an indispensable part in the Islamic philosophical tradition. So this tradition, from the Ancient Greek philosophical tradition, says that all practices in life must emerge depending on metaphysical principles.³ Therefore, we need to know Plato and Aristotle very well. Again we need to know the syncretism of them, namely Neo-Platonic worldview which is fed with the common elements of the two, so that we can see that it takes a lot of place in the Islamic religion.

What jointly expressed by the Platonic Ishrāqī tradition and the Aristotelian Mashshāī tradition would be the positioning of the woman through metaphysics. It is necessary to say that all of the facts on practice or about life and society are determined through metaphysical principles since all this is adopted through these principles.⁴ In this respect, it cannot be said that the Islamic

² Al-Kindī, *Risāla fī al-Ḥīla li-Daʿ al-Aḥzān*, ed. Mustafa Çağrı (Istanbul: Marmara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Vakfı Yayınları, 1998); Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, *Kitāb at-Ṭibb ar-Rūḥānī*, ed. Paul Krauss, *Rasāil al-Falsafīyya* (Cairo: Jāmiʿat al-Fuād al-Awwal, 1939); Ikhwan al-Şafā, *Rasāil Ikhwān aş-Şafāʾ wa Ḥillān al-Wafāʾ* (Beirut: Dār Şādir, 1957).

³ To get information what about metaphysics, its main features and content, see al-Fārābī, *Fī Aghrād al-Ḥakīm fī Kullī Maqāla min al-Kitāb al-Mawsūm bi al-Ḥurūf*, ed. Friedrich Dieterici, *Alfārābī's Philosophische Abhandlungen* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1890), 34-8.

⁴ For the ideal worldview defended by Platonic school, see Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin Books, 1987), VII; Plotinus, *The Enneads*,

philosophical tradition is within the properly view of life. Because it cannot be possible to fully reflect the discourses determined the life with reference to its own metaphysical conception to that life.

Woman in Islamic Philosophy

The negative approach of the Pythagorean tradition to woman, especially al-Rāzī, taking advantage of the Platonic point of view (by seeing woman as an object of love and desire, and concerning that love would drive human being apart intelligible faculties and give place to desire prior to intellect), expresses that woman will defeat those who are engaged in philosophy. From the al-Rāzī's argument that it should definitely not be married and be in love, we can say that woman is regarded as an object which to inactivate intellectual faculties in Islamic Pythagorean philosophy. Since the society has been determined by an *idea* in the Platonic tradition, not only the woman but also the man has no individual role in society. There is a social role or a social mind, and Plato considers woman as an element of this social role. From this point of view, this occurs in the conception of the state, especially of morality and politics, in Islamic philosophical tradition. It is known that especially the policies of Aristotelian tradition are not much in the Islamic world. It has been held some arguments as the reason for this such as Plato's *Republic* was known and Aristotle's *Politics* was not known, but we think it is an insubstantial argument. For the Aristotelian conception of state does not match with the conception of the Islamic state. In particular, because an understanding stood out the aristocracy or elites which adopted the rule of the administration and more likely to be simulated or associated by the *caliph* and *philosopher king*, we can say that Plato's *Republic* dominated the Islamic world completely.

trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Penguin Books, 1991), VI. For the foundations of the Aristotelian metaphysics, see Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin Books, 2004), IV.

Now, it is approached to the subject of woman and other social events, by means of integration the Platonic conception of the state which is dominant in the Islamic world with the Aristotelian *Nicomachean Ethics* which dominate in the field of morality.⁵ There is no place for women in Plato because the Ancient Greek philosophical tradition reflects the culture of the Ancient Greek society. Since there is a patriarchal family structure in Greek culture, the woman is a being, who comes after the slaves, is a member of the family with children and dependent on the family. She only comes to the fore with her fertility, which makes her obliged to work only in a certain division of labor. Despite the fact that Plato paid attention to the education of woman in her State, women cannot be said to have many places in the state administration because their emotions and desires prioritize to their intellectual faculties. In Plato, a woman can only be in a category of protector, so she may be a part of the military class, but this also has certain conditions.

In the Platonic tradition, women are the common property of society and keep living from any kind of a shame. In the Islamic philosophical tradition, this situation is somewhat more softened. When we look at the conception of the state of *al-Madīna al-Fāḍila* by al-Fārābī, which is a commentary of Plato's *Republic*, it is possible to say that the woman is not represented anywhere. Al-Fārābī does not mention anywhere about the woman or the role of the woman. Now, if we consider that there is a virtuous chief or *imam* who represented the same thing with a concept of the prophet in the head of virtuous state or society, we clearly understand that there is no role for the woman in the state. Because the intellectual faculty exacts us representing a mind that

⁵ The foundation of morality has always been in the direction of Aristotelian thought in the Islamic conception of society and politics as well as in philosophy. The moral tradition, which started with Ibn Miskawaih and continued with Ṭūsī, always made statements that laid the foundations of *Nicomachean Ethics*. However, there is a point that should not be forgotten that this tradition is sometimes interpreted from a Platonic perspective. For the basic work of the Aristotelian tradition, see Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Harris Rackham (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Edition, 1996).

prefers to the emotion or the desire. Al-Fārābī implies that women can never become a *caliph* or a *head of state* and she cannot attain a wise personality within the administration by means of her emotional entity and crushing drop in her desires.

When we look at Avicenna, we can see that he targets the priority of power as a representation of the Platonic tradition. Avicenna remarks some of the religious texts, Quran and hadiths slightly apart from the Peripatetic Islamic philosophical tradition. Here we see that the philosopher has a negative attitude towards woman. One of the reasons for this is undoubtedly inheritance from Greek thought, that is to say, Avicenna did also not give the right which has not been given by Ammonian tradition. Based on the verses about the woman's inheritance and protection of men for women, Avicenna speaks out that her place is home and she has no any power of representation out of the home, and that women cannot have a place in the administration due to being weak-minded, giving her emotions prominence and being fanciful.⁶

The discourse that the woman has weak-mind plays an important role in Avicenna's perception of the woman. Since the woman cannot be included in any administration due to her lack of reason, the woman is a being that works for Avicenna only in terms of fertility. But her fertility is not an obstacle for her to marry with an elite man. In order to get married a philosopher man with woman befitting to his own, the woman has to be educated at home. That is, the woman who is not given any duty has been granted the chance to obtain the honor of being a mother of a certain human only with fertility. In this way, the woman should be content with the honor of being the wife of a certain man. Avicenna said that it was the right decision for God not to give the divorce right to the woman because of emotional and weak-minded. In this respect, it is stated in the Avicennian tradition that women are not considered as any social personality and

⁶ Avicenna, *al-Ilāhiyyāt min Kitāb ash-Shifā'*, ed. Āyatullāh Ḥasanzādah al-Āmulī (Qum: Maktab al-I'lām al-Islāmī, 1997-8), X.

they do not have any social position, and even according to Avicenna, the most important thing of woman is her chastity, honor, obedience to husband and being a good wife and raising good children for him.

According to al-Ghazālī who maintains this view, since the marriage contract between men and women resembles slavery, she must obey her husband in full, so that it is necessary to do what his husband says, in such a way that does not imply a revolt to God.⁷ Obviously, in this idea whose bases go back to Aristotle, the woman is accepted as a being weak-minded inherently, insufficient and unstable in reasoning. From this perspective, it is thought that the existence of a man is an active form and of a woman as a passive matter. Similarly, both thinkers argued that the woman has to be provided her education and maintained protection by the man at home, by telling about the lack of reason resulting from the creation of the woman, the pursuit of her desires and her ambitiousness.

In the same way, it is said in the views of Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī that the woman should be used as a slave and must obey her husband.⁸ This is related to the fact that the head of household is the man, with reference to the householding is the same as the state administration and the house should be ruled by reason because the state can be ruled by reason.⁹ According to al-Ṭūsī, the goal of marriage is to protect the property and ensure the continuation of the generation. Therefore, a housewife must have two priority qualifications, those are thriftiness and fertility. In addition, she should be gentle, modest, chaste, obedient and religious. Her beauty should not be the main cause to get married, because the woman's beauty can often be a trap and cruelty due to her weak-mind.

⁷ Al-Ghazālī. *at-Tibr al-Masbūk fī Naṣīhat al-Mulūk*, trans. Alī b. Mubārak & ed. Aḥmad Shamsuddīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1988).

⁸ Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī. *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī*, ed. Muḥtabā Minouī & ʿAlī Riḍā Ḥaydari (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Khawārizmī, 1976), II.3.

⁹ For Aristotle's views on the householding, see Aristotle, *The Politics of Aristotle*, trans. Ernest Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), III.

The most important discourses in Islamic philosophy belong to Averroes. In the chapter on the protectors and the wise men of his *Kitāb as-Siyāsa*, commented Plato's *Republic*, as opposed to Plato, Averroes clearly says from Aristotelian psychology that the woman is the same race with the man and deserves all kinds of education because she is a human being.¹⁰ Here Averroes discusses whether the woman can perform other social duties and does this through gender. The question of whether a woman is a human as a sex will be given the answer that she is definitely a human by nature. So, in society, in the same way, women can do many things that men are able to do, or even have to do. Thus, Averroes states that the Andalusian women lost their own essential feelings in time and tried to live without any pleasure, by keeping their hands off the social activities and by directing themselves to the things such as carpet weaving which were just about subsistence.

Talking about the importance given to women by Islam, Averroes speaks of the fact that the woman was taken the backseat in Islamic society and culture in contradiction with the Qur'an's orders. For according to Quran, the woman was the same animal that derives from the same soul as the man and complements each other. Averroes expressed that women wanted to be taken the backseat themselves and that they abstracted from society by detracting them from social works and turning themselves to household chores. Consequently, for Averroes, by losing their abilities, they cause the impoverishment of societies because of living as a weed and they are represented as a burden in the family. Averroes says that women's education is obligatory like men and that they should be wise people. In social work, women should be directed towards jobs that are in their own power even though they represent weak power, while men should leave their jobs to women in which they are less talented than women and they are not capable. Averroes gave an example

¹⁰ Averroes. *aḍ-Ḍarūrī fī as-Siyāsa: Mukhtaṣar Kitāb as-Siyāsa li-Aflāṭūn*, trans. Aḥmad Shehlān (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdat al-'Arabiyya, 1998), I.

of music, for the composition of the music made by the man and read by the woman. Averroes introduces examples of animals in particular, indicating that people are like animals and that people can do the same work with the male and female. But they should do so according to their size, their grade and intelligence in their social work.

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