TASAVVUF ARAŞTIRMALARI ENSTİTÜSÜ DERGİSİ TAED | JISS JOURNAL OF THE INSTITUTE FOR SUFI STUDIES

The Foreign and Imaginal In Ibn ‘Arabī’s Turjuman al-Ashwaq

İbn ‘Arabī’nin Tercümânü’l-Eşvâk Adlı Eserinde Yabancı ve Hayâlî

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Abstract

Turjumān al-ashwāq is a mystical treatise that was penned by the great Sufi saint Ibn ‘Arabi. This work, which was rendered into English under various appellations, reflects his orthodoxy of love and serves as a plea for initiating friendly relations amidst cultures and world nations. The allegorical poems and annotations underscore that Ibn ‘Arabi possessed a third eye and clairvoyance when he approached specific truths around him. Building on Henry Corbin’s framework of “creative imagination” and Stuart Hall’s theoretical model of “preferred reading”, I showcase how Ibn ‘Arabi’s inner and insightful journey to the realm of the heart shaped his knowledge and simultaneously unleashed his cognition about dialogue and Otherness.

Keywords: Ibn ‘Arabi; Kashf; Turjumān al-ashwāq; the Foreign; Preferred Reading.

Özet

Tercümânü’l-eşvâk, Şeyh-i Ekber Muhyiddîn İbn ‘Arabî tarafından kaleme alınmış tasavvufî bir risâledir. Farklı isimler altında İngilizceye tercüme edilmiş olan bu eser, onun, ilâhî aşka sıkıya sıkıya bağlı olan tutumunu yansıtırarak çeşitli kültür ve uluslarlar arasında dostane ilişkilerin tesis edilmesi maksadıyla bir “bahane” işlevi görür. Eserde yer alan alegorik şiir ve hâşiyeler, İbn ‘Arabî’nin, etrafındaki birtakım hakîkatlere yaklaşırken nasıl bir üçüncü göze ve basirete sahip olduğunun altını çizmektedir. Bu çalışmada, Henri Corbin’in çerçevesini çizdiği “Aktif Hayal” ile Stuart Hall’un “egemen okuma” teorik modeline dayanarak, İbn ‘Arabî’nin “kalp âlemi”ne yaptığı mânevî seferin, onun ilmini (knowledge) nasıl şekillendirdiği ve eş zamanlı olarak yine onun diyalog ve Ötekilik hakkındaki yaklaşımını nasıl ortaya çıkardığı incelenmeye çalışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İbn ‘Arabî, keşf, Tercümânü’l-eşvâk, öteki, egemen okuma.

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Cilt/Volume: 2 • Sayı/Number: 1 • Mayıs/May 2023
DOİ: 10.32739/ustad.2023.3.XX

Introduction

When Ibn 'Arabī (d. 543/1240) met the late Muslim philosopher and eminent theologian Ibn Rushd, popularly known in the West as Averroes, "he stood up in his place out of love and respect." Then, he embraced the youth and exclaimed: "Yes!" To which the young mystic unhesitatingly responded: "Yes."[1] Some historical records informed us that the Aristotelian philosopher wanted to see Ibn 'Arabi as he heard of his *kashf* (lit. unveiling) – a spiritual station he savoured during his spiritual retreat.[2] This paper is a reflection upon the foreign and imaginal that crop up in Ibn 'Arabi's *Turjumān al-ashwāq*. Aside from detailing on *Kashf* and human dialogue, I aim to account for the symbols of the heart and inner journey to apprehend Ibn 'Arabi's creed of love and view of the "Other".

Kashf: A Heavenly Light

Kashf is located at the center of the Sūfī epistemology and can be described as "supersensory, revealed knowledge that is confined to the select few."[3] It is generated by the faculty of the heart without the interference of the mind or the intellect. Such heavenly light also points to the exploration of hidden truths and the capacity to penetrate beneath the surface to the substance of things. On account of their devotional and supererogatory practices, Sūfīs, and for the time being, Ibn 'Arabī, were able to see what the mainstream believers were unable to behold or capture with their sensory systems.

1 William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (New York: State U of New York, 1989) 145-190.

2 In Arabic "*khalwa*", retreat or spiritual seclusion, is regarded as a traditional practice amongst the Sufi orders, consisting of a period during which a Sheikh's disciple engages in a total retreat from the world, living in the *zawiya* in complete isolation, meditating, and fasting in order to advance on the mystical path. See Paulo G. Pinto, "The Limits of the Public: Sufism and the Religious Debate in Syria", in *Public Islam and the Common* Good, ed. Armando Salvatore and Dalte F. Eickelman (Leiden: Brill, 197).

3 Alexander Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 311.

According to one saying often evoked in Sūfī texts, "Knowledge is a light which God throws into the heart of whomsoever He will."[4] Specks of this knowledge were so eloquently expressed by Ibn 'Arabī in his mystical poetry through a constellation of wise symbols -allusions and coded images that baffle and sometimes perplex Sūfī and non-Sūfī practitioners.

His masterwork, *Turjumān al-ashwāq*,[5] is indeed replete with some historical figures appertaining to the Seen and Unseen worlds. In these poems, he pointed metaphorically to several patterns of Divine knowledge and spiritual mysteries, along with various intellectual sciences and religious exhortations.[6] The poems subsume instances of human dialogue and deeply felt expressions of love, nostalgia and communion. Ever single text of it can be deemed as a plea for restoring human relations and building horizontal links between human beings regardless of their stark differences. The proper names and figures of speech used throughout propose a roadmap for peace makers and apologetics of dialogue to endorse unity and decry all forms of division and partitioning. By dialogue, I mean the spontaneous overflow of the Sūfī love and enlightened reflections, the craving after amity as well as the pursuit of communal harmony and co-existence.

Dialogue and Reconciliation

Irrespective of the definitions circulating in academia, there is still much fuzziness hovering over the boundaries of this theoretical concept that seems to shape Ibn 'Arabī's poetry and hymns on the

4 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 170.

5 The book includes the love-poems that Ibn 'Arabī composed at Mecca whilst visiting the holy places. He admitted that he used the erotic style and form of expression because men's souls are enamoured of it. See Muḥyi'ddīn Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Turjumān al-ashwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes*, edited and translated by Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1911), 2-4.

6 Ibid.

divine. This term has long been part of the human discourse, yet in recent decades it has taken on a greatly deepened meaning, especially in the area of spirituality and religion.

> It comes originally from two Greek words, dia, "across", "together", and logos, "thinking" as in "logic", and all the words ending in "logy," meaning systematic thinking about something (…). Secondarily, it means the expression of our thinking, "words". Thus, literally "dia-logue" means "thinking and speaking together".[7]

When transposed to the realm of Sūfism, and more precisely to *Turjumān al-ashwāq*, dialogue indicates peace and love within; what is more, it delineates wholeness and inner as well as outer symmetry in as much as it assists in offering a new perspective to unity and reconciliation that are achieved through the interplay of humanity and love and the positive engagement of the individual with the world at large. Across history, world leaders might have introduced a recipe of dialogue to heal the ills humanity sustained. However, the enormous roles played by the Sūfī masters either in inaugurating dialogue or nurturing the orthodoxy of love amidst nations and civilizations have been overshadowed or obscured.

This rings true for Ibn 'Arabī's *Turjumān al-ashwāq*, which did not receive considerable attention by scholars and researchers. The book stands out as a salutary reference for fixing human relations and initiating a rapprochement between world religions. It conveys the essential unity of the divine vision in three religious houses: the mosque, the church and the synagogue.[8] This collection of love-poems, which was rendered into English with various appellations such as *The Interpreter of Desires*;[9] *The Translator of Desires*;[10] *The Discloser of Desires*,[11] is presumably his magnum opus because it yields profound insights, directions and signposts for human beings to immerse themselves into inter and intra-faith dialogue by imbibing Divine love and merging with the Beloved.[12]

In fact, the multiple readings and translations available bear a testimony to the polysemous nature of the work, its subtle meanings and allegorical dimensions. Take for instance, the first word, *Turjumān*, featuring in the title of the source text; it can be rendered as "translator, translation, interpreter, interpretation, discloser, disclosure, guide, or guidebook. The word is closely related to the word for biography, *tarjama*".[13] It is an eye-striking title that positions the reader in a kaleidoscopic space where a priori assumptions and subjective exegesis ought to be avoided and deactivated. By opting for such arcane expression, Ibn 'Arabī, directly or obliquely,

7 Leonard Swideler, "Sorting Out Meanings: 'Religion', 'Spiritual', 'Interreligious', 'Interfaith', Etc." *Journal of Ecummenical Studies*, 49 (3) 376.

8 See Roger Boase, *Islam and Global Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 2016).

9 This English version harks back to 1911, and it was penned by the English orientalist and scholar Reynold A. Nicholson (1868-1945) of Cambridge. He remains the most celebrated exponent of Ibn 'Arabī in the Anglophone world; he was well erudite both in Islamic Sūfism and Islamic literature as he translated the works of several mystics such as al-Hujwīrī, Rūmī and Iqbāl.

10 Michael Sells has also provided another translation of these medieval odes; he referred to the metaliterature or accounts that passed on by subsequent generations as 'The Tale of the Tarjumān', with three interrelated aspects: 'The Romance of the Tarjumān', 'The Trial of the Tarjumān', and the 'Allegory of the Tarjumān'. See Michael Sells, *The Translator of Desires: Poems by Muḥyi'ddīn Ibn 'Arabī* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U Press, 2021), xv.

11 This translation appertains to Mohamed Haj Yousef and it is one of two unique versions of Ibn 'Arabī's *Turjumān al-ashwāq* and his own commentary on it: Dhakhā'ir al-'Aalaq (The Precious Repository).

12 Other mystic poets including but not limited to Rabi'a 'Adawiya, Rūmī, al-Shushtarī, al-Harrāq, etc. have chanted over Divine love. Such sort of love has the potential to bring the wayfarer closer to God and nearer to His creations. In *Turjumān al-ashwāq*, Ibn 'Arabī refers to Sūfism as the religion of love. As for God, He comes in different guises: the Lover, Loved and the Beloved. However, the last term remains the most common as it is frequently used in his love poetry. Thus, for Ibn 'Arabī and all mystics, it is only through the power of love that humanity can return to its inherent origin and purity.

13 Sells, *The Translator of* Desires, xv.

advances what can be called a "preferred reading"[14] to his love-poems so as to guide, limit and control their interpretation by the potential audience on the one hand and so as not to be misunderstood and go misjudged on the other hand.

The book comprises about 61 love-poems that are encoded and simultaneously decoded by the author to enable the reader to perceive the true enigma of Divine love and knowledge with the view to discern the essence of humanity and its vocation on mother earth. Love is not as easy as we may think; it is not dissimilar from dialogue which in turn appears to encapsulate both esoteric and exoteric meanings (i.e. inner and outer realities), each of which requires specific tools, methodologies and acumen to be fully apprehended and grasped.

> The *Turjumān al-ashwāq* is itself a display of encoding; it is filled with secrets that need deciphering, as Ibn 'Arabī himself seems to perform in the commentary he later produced. At the heart of Ibn 'Arabī's cosmogony is an Essence, a Being, that calls to all the Lovers of creation, that seeks to find each shattered remnant of the Unity and gather them all together.[15]

Notwithstanding the controversies it sparked among some scholars and jurists, *Turjumān al-ashwāq* was viewed as a *chef-d'oeuvre* par excellence; it is a hymn to God, a soliloquy and a code of conduct for the Sūfī seekers walking on the Sūfī path since it unpacks the requisites of human/divine love and the etiquettes of the mystical journey in such a marvelous and intriguing fashion. This accounts for its strong presence in the Sūfī circles because some orders tend to recite its lines in their occasional meetings and regular gatherings.[16]

In this seminal love-poem, *ishārāt* (codes and allusions) hint to the longings, hardships and afflictions of lovers, their unwavering desires to achieve unification and reunion with their beloveds, and it is as the author admitted, an endorsement of the theme of "Heavenly", not earthly love,[17] where he himself injected some borrowings from sacred texts and holy sites to showcase "the spiritual realities" that he and his ilk have access to.[18] The most recurrent images and symbols permeating his reflections on the divine are doubtlessly embedded in the shifting symbol of "the heart".

The Heart of Gnostics

What does the heart stand for in the *Turjumān*? It is an interworld that accepts and never rejects the formal differences existing in the wide cosmos. The heart is hailed as the heart owing to its evolving and mercurial nature. As Ibn 'Arabī reminds us, the heart also takes the colour of "the various influences by which it is affected" (69: comm. 13). His heart also designates the hearts of gnostics and saints of God who hanker after the "Divine Ideas, for they seek it and it seeks them" (48: comm. 1). The mission of the heart, therefore, is to be our compass or director in life.[19]

There is a compromise among the Sūfī masters that the whole universe is included in the heart of the noble saint and that the heart of the noble saint is

14 A 'preferred reading' of a media text is one in which the spectator takes up the intended meaning, finding it relatively easy to align with the messages and attitudes of those who have created the text. An 'oppositional reading' is one that rejects this intended response. See Jill Nelmes, *An Introduction to Film Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 111.

15 A. S. Lazikani, "Secrecy", in *Emotion in Christian and Islamic Contemplative Texts, 1100-1250: Cry of the Turtledove* (Oxford: Springer, 2021), 189.

16 In Morocco, adherents to Sūfī orders and paths recite, individually and collectively, some poems from *Turjumān al-ashwāq* during the sessions of *dhikr* and *Sama'* (lit. audition), and the recitations in question concern odes IV (p. 7), XI (p. 19), XLV (p. 39) and LIX (p. 45). See Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Turjumān al-ashwāq*, 7-45.

17 See Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Turjumān al-ashwāq*, 2.

18 See Eric Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam*, translated by R. Gaetani (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010), 7.

19 See Nicholas Pearson, *Crystal Healing for the Heart: Gemstone Therapy for Physical, Emotional and Spiritual Well-Being* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017).

at the center of the universe.[20] When human beings encounter peace and dialogue within the realm of the heart, and when they savour the fragrance of love and unity inside their souls, they can reflect them easily in the outside world. At that moment, they can realize their uniformity and likeness and understand that the outward differences are not real at all but rather illusionary.

The symbols and soulful images associated with Ibn 'Arabī's "dilatable heart" are hard to decipher if one is not equipped with mystical knowledge and insights. A spiritual experience that hinges upon "neither sensual nor rational methods" is therefore required.[21] Put differently, the best explanation to Ibn 'Arabī "remains Ibn 'Arabī himself. The only medium to understand him is to become for a moment his disciple."[22] This is confirmed by his renowned translator Reynold A. Nicholson, who admitted finding himself often on the brink of confusion and defeat while reading and translating Ibn 'Arabī.

> For he found that rendering Ibn 'Arabī into a Western language was a labour almost beyond the capacities of any scholar. 'The vast bulk of Ibnu'l-'Arabī's writing', he declared, 'his technical and scholastic terminology, his recondite modes of thought, and the lack of method in exposition have, until recently, deterred European Orientalists from bestowing on him the attention which he deserves.[23]

The image of "the pilgrim's Ka'ba" (XI: 14), for instance, and as Ibn 'Arabī notes, indicates that his heart was encompassed by exalted spirits (69: comm. 14), and he was driven to follow "a faith of *fedele d'amore*" (Italics original)[24] through the chaste quest of love and search for reality. The "pasture of gazelles" (XI: 13) is arguably the transient world and the beautiful creatures that graze freely and wittingly in it, yet in the poem, as Ibn 'Arabī comments, it is a marker of "the objects of his life" (69: comm. 13).

"The tables of the Tora" (XI: 14) and "the book of the Koran" (XI: 14) underline that Ibn 'Arabī's heart sheltered a unique wisdom and inspiration from different religious orthodoxies; these miscellaneous creeds led him to a new discernment and recognition. Based on this explication, his heart mirrored the Mosaic sciences and the Muḥammadan knowledge (69: comm. 14). The phrase "A temple for idols" (XI: 14) can be described as an incarnation of the divine realities that were showered on his celestial heart, which in *Turjumān al-ashwāq* appeared also like "a solitary chamber" (52: comm. 7) in as much as it paves the ground not only for learning and meditation, but for discovery and edification as well.

The Inward Journey

Ibn 'Arabī's voyage to Mecca was part and parcel of the mystical journey -a journey toward the embracement of spiritual harmony, well-being and, most importantly, the espousal of alterity and Otherness.[25] It was a voyage from himself to the "Other" in him-

20 According to the mystic scholar Musa Muḥaiyaddeen, God placed the soul within a tiny dot within each heart and the entire universe is contained within that. Everything on the outside exists within. See Musa Muḥaiyaddeen. *Elixir of Truth: Inner Dimensions*, Vol. 2 (Atlantic City, NJ: The Witness Within, Inc., 2014), 175.

21 See Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 1975), 4.

22 Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, translated by R. Manheim (Princeton, N.J: Princeton U Press, 1969), 5.

23 Rom Landau, *The Philosophy of Ibn 'Arabī* (London: Routledge, 1959), 67.

24 Ibid. 135.

25 A term that acquired considerable value in contemporary critical and social theory from the 1980s; alterity is 'otherness'. Popularized in the work of the philosopher Emanuel Levinas in the 1970s, it originally meant a sense of the non-self, of something that is outside of, and therefore different from, the self. It is that which enables us to distinguish ourselves from the world, to see the world as outside us and our consciousness. See Pramod K. Nayar, *The Postcolonial Studies Dictionary* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015), 6.

self, where the traveler would not take a single step since "he was carried by the Real".[26] This physical and non-physical voyage entailed that Ibn 'Arabī keep the company of the spiritual gurus and mystics of the East, who would instruct him the outer sciences of *ṭarīqa* (path) and the inner sciences of the *ḥaqīqa* (reality).

Albeit his encounter with Niẓām *'Ayn ash-Shams*[27] (i.e. the daughter of Makinu'ddin), was coincidental and not scheduled beforehand, it opened up Ibn 'Arabī's eyes to the countless beauties of alterity and Otherness within him; because of this, he could not conceal his mesmerism by her godly-like features and imposing character. She was young, exceedingly beautiful, well-known for her piety and asceticism, and accustomed to taking part in the intellectual gatherings of her father. Elaborations of her spectacular wisdom and incredible eloquence, not to mention her vast scholarship and erudition, are accentuated by Ibn 'Arabī in this mystical treatise, which was initially condemned by some scholars as "vain and amatorious."[28]

Niẓām is a woman that dazzled whoever looked at her and her presence enriched intellectual conversations and implanted joy and jubilation in the hearts of the speakers. She is symptomatic of the sparkling light that we can spot at first sight in the Prophets (peace be upon them). The brightness springing up from her godly face, continues Ibn 'Arabī (II: comm. 8), is identical to the brightness of the four Books: the Koran, the Psalms, the Tora, and the Gospel.

Another character trait that is allotted exclusively to this spiritual being is that she is after all a tender girl, who outshined the moon and other women by her irradiation, to the effect that it is impossible for the human eyes to encompass her imposing charm or for the mind to delimit her ingenuity and righteousness. Thus, Niẓām was approached by Ibn 'Arabī from a mystical standpoint with affable expressions and friendly descriptions as he positioned her on the plane of sublimity and human perfection.

At times, she seemed like "a bishopess" (II: 6), a descendent from Rome not belonging to the realm of "expression and composition" (73: comm. 4). At other times, she is screened as a princess of Persia and an offspring of Iraq (XX: 17-18). In certain contexts, she is projected as "A phantom of delight" (XLIV: 4), veiling herself in a blush of shame as a pearl hides in a seashell. Remarkable of this accomplished woman is that she initiated the harmony of union because she is the reminder to peace, love and co-existence: she is half-Arab, half-foreign (XXIX: 14). The purity and serenity with which she talked and walked amongst intellectuals imparted the sweet odours of musk and the irresistible aroma of eastern breeze and saffron.

The Other Within

When Ibn 'Arabī beheld Niẓām, he beheld the "Other" in himself; he was entirely overcome with awe and delight, and he disclosed his philosophy of union and credo of unity, yielding entirely to Divine love and lamentation over the pains of disengagement and separation from his Beloved -God. For example, he admitted that he could not resist crying beside this Heavenly creature; so he was left to reminisce about the ancient tales of Arabian lovers such as Bishr and Hind, Qays and Lubna, Zaynab and 'Umar, or even Mayya and the forlorn Ghaylān.[29]

In truth, all these pre-mentioned earthly names, with the sensual love they may suggest to some people, were part of the imaginal world that "allows abstract meanings to take on concrete form."[30]The *mundus imaginalis* at hand, to use Corbin's phrase, engenders metaphorical symbols and images, codes and allusions that are extracted from the Sensible Forms to ease understanding and make the invisible

26 Muḥyi'ddīn Ibn Al-'Arabi, *The Secrets of Voyaging: Kitāb al-Isfār 'an natā'ij al-asfār.* Translated by Angela. Jaffray (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2015) 10.

27 Lit. the Spring of the Sun.

28 See Ibn al-'Arabī, *Turjumān al-ashwāq*, 2.

29 Ibid. 87.

30 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, ix.

truths intelligible to the average man. In the words of Groff Stanislav,

> The imaginal world possesses extension and dimensions, forms and colours, but these are not perceptible to the senses as they would be if they were properties of physical objects. But this realm is in every respect as fully ontologically real as the material world perceived by sensory organs and experiences of it can be verified by consensual validation by other people.[31]

Of particular note here is that the imaginal world Ibn ʻArabī sculptured with the allegorical images and conceptual metaphors explicated above is not a world of division or sectarianism, nor is it a world of anarchy or disruption; it is obviously a world of possibilities and potentialities, immortal longings, love and human visions. Unlike the corporeal world he inhabited, this ethereal world he observed and revisited, so to speak, does not confine him to a particular space or doctrine so long as it unchains him from the manacles of egomania and self-centeredness, prompting him at the same time to espouse sameness and eschew duality and binarism.

Conclusion

To cut it short, Ibn ʻArabī has connected the lower world with the higher worlds of truth and reality, where dialogue and everlasting love prevail. While longing for "a tender maiden" (XX: 16), learned and well-versed in poetry like Niẓām, he aspired to plunge himself into the basin of Divine love and Otherness so that he could settle in the station of "the Divine contemplation" (XX: comm. 8), which was unmistakingly eased by the heart and not by the rational mind. The objectives were twofold: first, he wanted to fathom the *raison d'être* of his own existence and second, he wanted to abrogate opposites and dualities disengaging humankind.

31 Stanislav Groff, "Transpersonal Theory", in *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology,* ed. Harris L. Friedman and Glenn Hartelius (West Sussex: Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015) 112.

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