

THE CREATIVE FEMININE PRINCIPLE IN IBN AL-‘ARABĪ’S SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

(PART-I)

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ABSTRACT

Analysis of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s concept of the feminine principle of existence reveals that this principle is inclusive of the following metaphysical concepts: “Universal Soul,” the “*barzakh*/ Imaginal World,” the “Breath of the All-Merciful,” “Universal Nature” and the “Real through Whom Creation Takes Place.” The significance of the feminine principle of existence becomes clear when its role is studied in juxtaposition with the role of the masculine principle of existence, the “Universal Spirit.” The conclusion drawn is that the feminine principle of existence is inherently creative as it has within its nature, both the attributes of receptivity and activity in order to create something new. The feminine principle is essentially creative as it receives the activity of the masculine principle of existence, for God’s creative power to become manifest through the interaction and activity that is thus generated within its “Womb”. The focus of the present article is to highlight the creative aspects of the feminine principle of existence in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s school of thought.

In this day and age when a lot of confusion is found regarding gender relationships in the contemporary world, and especially in the Muslim world, it is important to analyse traditional interpretations of the meaning of the terms “masculine” and “feminine.” The reason why something of value can be learnt from the great saints and sages of the past is that they depended on the knowledge gained from the revealed scriptures, sayings of the prophets and their own meditative practices, for developing clear and in-depth understanding of such fundamental concepts.

What do the terms “masculine” and “feminine” mean? What are the concepts hidden behind these terms’ obvious meanings? Why does the Qurān state that God made pairs/couples of everything in creation?

“And of everything We created a pair” (Qurān; 51:49). If that is the case, what differentiates the male from the female at the cosmic scale as well as at the human/microcosmic scale? How do these two principles interact at the cosmic level and how are they meant to interact at the microcosmic level of the human being? What part is played by these principles in the process of creation? Are both necessary for creation to take place? Are both principles as creative as each other? What is taught in the scriptures regarding the significance of these two principles? How have some of the greatest of Islamic thinkers interpreted the role these two principles play in the process of creation at the cosmic and human level? Is the feminine principle predominantly creative and if so why and how? What is the role of the masculine principle in the process of creation? Although it is nearly impossible to answer these questions briefly, an attempt had been made to tackle these questions as concisely and as is possible within the confines of an article.

Islam has its own prism from which reality is viewed, including the reality of the masculine and the feminine principle at play in the cosmos. According to Islamic sapiential tradition these two principles are understood to be the manifestations of God’s names of Majesty and of Beauty, respectively. In symbolic fashion, they represent all the polarities found at various levels of existence.¹³⁶

Within their inner selves, men and woman have the same configuration. Irrespective of the outer configuration, the masculine principle of the spirit and the feminine principle of the soul exist in both.¹³⁷ Differences exist between individuals depending on the extent to which they have polished both the masculine and feminine principles present within their personalities.

¹³⁶Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam. A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought*, Albany: State University of New York, 1992. p. 69.

¹³⁷ Bakhtiar, *Sufi Expressions of the Mystic Quest*, p. 21.

The aim of life, according to Islamic spirituality, is to allow the soul within the human configuration to follow its true nature so that it submits to God's will and then ascends and subsists in the spirit. The macrocosm already reflects this reality as Universal Nature is already feminine in its submissiveness (*muslim*) towards the active/masculine Will of the Universal Spirit.

Of everything in *wujūd* there is a couple, for the perfect human being, and the cosmos through the perfect human being, are in the form of the Real. The couple are the male and the female, hence an actor and the one acted upon. Thus the Real is the actor and the cosmos is something He acts upon, for it is the locus within which the reception of activity becomes manifest through the forms of the engendered qualities that come upon it one after another, such as movement and stillness, or coming together and becoming separate, or such as the forms of the colours, the attributes and relations.¹³⁸

The active and receptive principles are understood to correspond to the concept of the masculine and feminine principles as clearly elucidated in the works on Ibn al-ʿArabī and his school by William Chittick and Sachiko Murata. Following the ground-breaking work of Murata on the topic of *The Tao of Islam*, where the author makes an extensive and comprehensive case for relating the gender relationships in traditional Islamic thought with the principles of harmony espoused in the philosophy of the yin and yang in Chinese cosmology, this article goes on to focus on the predominantly creative function of the feminine principle in the Ibn al-ʿArabī's school of thought.

Clarity can be achieved regarding creativity within human beings by looking at the way Ibn al-ʿArabī interpreted the manifestation of the masculine and feminine principles at the macrocosmic and microcosmic levels of reality. Ibn al-ʿArabī's works and the works of his followers are

¹³⁸ Ibn al-ʿArabī, *al-Futuhāt al-makkiyya*, IV 132.17. Cf. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*. p. 175.

particularly useful in this respect.¹³⁹ It becomes important to note that the concept of creativity can never be understood without understanding the dynamics of the interaction that is found between the masculine and feminine principles of existence.

Ibn al-ʿArabī believes that the feminine principle of existence corresponds to the realm of the Universal Soul or Tablet at the macrocosmic level, as opposed to the Pen, which signifies the masculine principle of the Spirit. He writes:

A supra-sensory intelligible marriage takes place between the Pen and the Tablet, and leaves a visible, sensory trace.... The trace that was deposited in the Tablet was like the sperm that is ejaculated and set within the womb of the female. The meanings deposited within the celestial letters that become manifest from that writing are like the spirits of the children deposited within their bodies.¹⁴⁰

For Ibn al-ʿArabī the masculine principle is the active principle that exercises an effect and the feminine principle is the receptive principle that receives activity and in turn produces an effect of its own. What is produced is a result of the interaction of the receptivity and activity within the feminine principle. Ibn al-ʿArabī considers the Pen as the masculine principle which corresponds to the “World of the Command” exercising an effect on the Tablet. The Tablet corresponds to the “World of Universal Nature/Cosmos” is the feminine principle receiving the effect for the purpose of creation. Ibn al-ʿArabī uses the symbolism of the “father” and “mother” to signify these two principles.

Everything that exercises an effect [*muʾaththir*] is a father, and everything that receives an effect [*muʾaththar fiḥ*] is a mother. This is the general rule

¹³⁹ Sachiko Murata’s book *The Tao of Islam* is essential reading for a detailed study of this aspect of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s school of thought.

¹⁴⁰ Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futuḥāt* I 139.29. Cf. Murata, *Tao*, p. 153.

of this chapter. That which is born between the two from the effect is called a son [*ibn*] or a child [*mumwallad*].

The spirits are all fathers, while Nature is the mother, since Nature is the locus of transmutations. When the spirits turn their attention towards the pillars the elements which are receptive toward change and transmutation, the children the minerals, plants, animals, and jinn become manifest in Nature. The most perfect of these is the human being.¹⁴¹

Therefore the feminine principle is not just a passive recipient of activity, instead it interacts and is active in relation to what it receives to produce, create or give birth to something new. While activity is the predominant character of the masculine principle, and receptivity the predominant character of the feminine principle, both receptivity and activity are part of the creative nature of the feminine principle. The reason being that the activity of producing something new after receiving an effect from the masculine principle is inherent in it. In fact Ibn al-ʿArabī believes that the Essence, which is the Source of all creativity is feminine because it contains both the active and receptive principles of existence.¹⁴²

Ibn al-ʿArabī views creativity within human beings from the standpoint of *al-khayāl*, creative imagination and *al-himma*, the creative power of the heart to impress images and ideas on the cosmos. This power can be raised through prayer, invocation, meditation and knowledge to such a level that it becomes the isthmus through which God’s creative imagination is channelised. For most people fantasy and daydreams are the extent to which their *himma* leads them to, but for the folk of God well versed in meditation, the images in their imagination become consonant with divine imagination and find expression in objective reality.¹⁴³ *Himma* is defined as, “Aspiration,” which is

¹⁴¹ Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futuḥāt* I 138.17 (Y 2,309.2). Cf. Murata, *Tao*. p. 145.

¹⁴² For a detailed discussion of the feminine nature of the Essence see Ibn al-ʿArabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, last chapter.

¹⁴³ Iyer, *The Seals of Wisdom from the Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, p. 24.

the power of concentration through which the seeker focuses on the Real.¹⁴⁴ Ibn al-ʿArabī explains how the folk of God reach this level of spirituality:

Thus they incline toward seclusions and formulas of remembrance so as to praise Him in whose hand is the sovereignty [Qurʾān 36:83]. Once the soul is purified and the natural veil between it and the World of Sovereignty is lifted, there becomes impressed in the soul’s mirror all the knowledges imprinted in the forms of the World of Sovereignty.¹⁴⁵

When a person has developed his/her *al-himma* to this extent, he or she is able to perform miracles, which Ibn al-ʿArabī terms “the breaking of habits,” such as those performed by Khidr.¹⁴⁶ Ibn al-ʿArabī believed that this power could also become the cause of malicious magic if, it is practiced by those who are unable to rid themselves of egoistical tendencies, and are without the guidance of a spiritual master.¹⁴⁷

When *al-himma* is concentrated, it can lead to the creative transformation of the soul from its attachment to the corporeal world to its ascent into the spiritual world. In Ibn al-ʿArabī’s philosophy, the person who is able to raise this creative power of *al-himma* to the highest level is the *insān al-kāmil*, the perfect human being.¹⁴⁸ This perfect human being is a *barzakh*, an isthmus that separates and links God and the cosmos. The *insān al-kāmil* is the person who actualizes his or her own archetypal reality through the use of his or her *khayāl* and *himma*.

The method used for manifesting creativity in Sufism is the remembrance, invocation and getting to know the Divine order as it is present in a hidden reality within all entities and forms of the cosmos.¹⁴⁹ Knowledge of the Divine order includes knowledge and awareness of the creative masculine

¹⁴⁴ Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, p. 317.

¹⁴⁵ Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futuḥāt* II 48.17. Cf. *Self-Disclosure*, p. 318.

¹⁴⁶ Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futuḥāt* II 48.17. Cf. *Self-Disclosure*, p. 318.

¹⁴⁷ Iyer, *The Seals of Wisdom from the Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, p. 24.

¹⁴⁸ Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futuḥāt* II 48.17. Cf. *Self-Disclosure*, p. 318.

¹⁴⁹ *Sufi Expressions*, p. 6.

principle and the creative feminine principles of existence that are reflected within the spirit and soul of human beings, respectively.

Creativity understood in this manner aims to remember and invoke this hidden archetypical reality while acting on a form so that what is hidden becomes manifest. In other words, it aims for the actualization of this hidden reality either in an external form such as any object of art, or an internal form such as that of the soul, which is spiritualized through this creative process.¹⁵⁰ Creativity in this sense, aims to invoke the divine archetypical realities of things so that they are manifested within different forms and through their manifestation the One Creator can be glorified.

Moreover another result of creativity when it is expressed in this manner is that the correspondence between the human spirit and soul and the Divine Source from which they originates becomes known. Through this creative process involving *al-khayāl* and *al-himma*, human beings can come to know their own hidden realities.

The Creative Feminine Principle and the *Barzakh* / The World of Creative Imagination

Understanding the concept of *barzakh*/ the world of creative imagination in Ibn al-ʿArabī's philosophy highlights the fact that creativity and the whole creative process cannot be regarded from the viewpoint of only the active masculine principle. Instead, it becomes clear that both principles, i.e. masculine and feminine, are required for any creativity to take place.

Within God's cosmos human beings have been granted a special status, that of a microcosm, reflecting the ontological realities that are found in the macrocosm. The human spirit corresponds to the realm of the macrocosmic spirit (Pen/First Intellect), the human soul or imagination corresponds to the realm of the macrocosmic soul (Tablet/Universal Soul) or Imaginal World (*barzakh*) and the human body corresponds to the realm of the macrocosmic

¹⁵⁰ *Sufi Expressions*, p. 6.

material universe because only the cosmos in its entirety and the human being are forms of the name of Allah.¹⁵¹

Barẓakh is an intermediate reality between any two realities. Ibn al-‘Arabī writes about two types of *barẓakhs*. The first one, the macrocosmic *barẓakh*, “Nondelimited Imagination” or “Unbounded Imagination” (*al-khayāl al-mutlaq*) is *existence per se* because it is everything that comes into existence between the “Sheer Being” of God and “nothingness”.¹⁵² The other is the “delimited imagination” or “bound imagination” (*al-khayāl al-muqayyad*) also known as the imaginal world that is present as an intermediate reality of the soul between the spiritual world and the corporeal world.¹⁵³

Most of the time when Ibn al-‘Arabī talks of imagination he is referring to the “bound imagination.”¹⁵⁴ “Bound imagination” can be divided into two further types of imaginations: “contiguous” (*muttaṣil*) and “discontiguous” (*munfaṣil*). “Contiguous imagination” stands for the soul and the faculty of imagination in the human microcosm whereas “discontiguous imagination” stands for the realm of the soul, which lies as an intermediate realm between the spiritual realm and the corporeal realm.¹⁵⁵

Furthermore, sometimes Ibn al-‘Arabī also uses the word imagination in the sense of the “faculty of imagination” which is one of the attributes of the soul, along with memory, reason, and reflection.¹⁵⁶ At some instances Ibn al-‘Arabī clearly distinguishes among the meaning of the word imagination that he employs but most of the times he discusses imagination in general terms or in such a way that the context reveals the meaning of the term that he is employing.

¹⁵¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futuḥāt*, II 326.26, II 385.8. Cf. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*. p. 297. From now on this book will be referred to as SPK as this is the abbreviation for the book given by the author himself.

¹⁵² Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futuḥāt* IV 393.10. Cf. Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, p. 332.

¹⁵³ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futuḥāt* IV 393.10. Cf. Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, p. 332.

¹⁵⁴ Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*. p. 332

¹⁵⁵ Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*. p. 332

¹⁵⁶ Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*. p. 332.

The Qurān states, “It is He who let forth the two oceans... between them a *barzakh*” (Qurān 25:53). The *barzakh* is the isthmus between the two oceans. It is the in-between reality, which allows for an interconnection between two separate and distinct realities such as heaven and earth. Heaven and earth in Sufi and philosophic terminology denote the spiritual and material worlds. The *barzakh* connects and forms an avenue for the permeation of the spiritual world into the material world and vice versa.

Ibn al-ʿArabī believes the *barzakh* to be “the world of imagination”, the avenue from whence all creativity takes place. He calls it *alam-ul-mithal* or *alam-ul-khayāl* where God’s quality of bringing all opposites together in a “coincidence of opposites” (*jamʿ al-addād*) manifests itself.¹⁵⁷

Imagination needs and possesses strength in order to bring two opposing realities together therefore the world of *barzakh* manifests the divine quality *al-qawi*, “the strong”. Ibn al-ʿArabī writes, “One of the effects of strength is the creation of the world of imagination in order to make manifest within it the fact that it brings together all opposites (*al-jamʿ bayn al-addād*). It is impossible for sense perception or the rational faculty to bring together opposites, but it is not impossible for imagination.”¹⁵⁸

Higher level of spiritual awareness brings about higher awareness of and engagement with the world of creative imagination. One of the qualities that distinguishes ordinary human from the prophets and saints is the awareness and alertness that the latter display towards the realm of “creative imagination”, the *barzakh* which connects them to the spiritual world from this material existence. Human rational faculty and sense perception are not capable of fathoming the spiritual world on their own without the help of the realm of imagination.

¹⁵⁷ Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futuḥāt* IV 325.2. Cf. Chittick, *SPK*, p. 116.

¹⁵⁸ Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futuḥāt* IV 325.2. Cf. Chittick. *SPK*, p. 116.

All polarities come together in “the realm of imagination”, even the polarity between “Sheer Being” and nothingness. The reality of this *‘alam al-barzakh* is that it is all comprehensive and all-powerful.¹⁵⁹

This “coincidence of opposites” is particularly striking in *existence per se* which ambiguously brings together God and that which is not God. Ibn al-‘Arabī explains this ambiguity of existence through the Qur’ānic verse revealed after the famous battle of Badr, “You did not throw when you threw, but God threw” (Qur’ān 8:17). Muslims won the battle after the Prophet had thrown a handful of sand in the direction of the enemy. Ibn al-‘Arabī believes that this Qur’ānic verse reveals that in actual fact God is the reality behind all appearance. The Prophet’s reality is a *barzakhī*/ imaginal reality,¹⁶⁰ which is primarily a feminine reality as its predominant characteristic is to receive the activity of God, just like, the reality of everything in the cosmos. Ibn al-‘Arabī comes to the conclusion that existence is He/Not He. He states, “There is none in Being/existence but God”.¹⁶¹

God’s creativity has both an active/masculine and a receptive/feminine dimension. The Qur’ān states that when He wills for a thing to be created, (Qur’ān 16:40) He says to it, “Be” and it is thereby created. From the angle of God’s will, creativity, has a masculine dimension and from the angle of receiving the command (*amr*) of God and manifesting that which God is creating, creativity displays a feminine dimension. Without receptivity there would be no creation. Ibn al-‘Arabī explains this concept in the following way:

¹⁵⁹ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futuḥāt* II 312.23, 31. Cf. Chittick. *SPK*, p. 121.

¹⁶⁰ It is to be noted that the terms “imagination” and “imaginal” are not to be understood in their modern day meaning of “fancy” or “flights of the mind, beyond reality.” Instead, Ibn al-‘Arabī believes that the *barzakhī*/ Imaginal realm or “world of Imagination” is an extremely powerful realm that denotes the “realm of the soul.” This realm is closer to the spiritual realm and therefore more “real” than the corporeal realm. The reason being that the corporeal realm is entirely dependent for its existence on the spiritual and imaginal realms of reality.

¹⁶¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futuḥāt* II 216.12. Cf. Chittick. *SPK*, p. 114.

That is why, concerning the divine existence-giving, the Koran has come with “word,” which is masculine, and “desire,” which is feminine, for God gave existence to the cosmos from a word and a desire. Thus it became manifest from a masculine and a feminine noun. He says, *Our only word to a thing*—“thing” being the most indefinite of the indefinites, while “word” is masculine—*when we desire it*—“desire” being feminine—*is to say to it “Be!” so it comes to be* [16:40]. Thus engendering becomes manifest in the desire from the word, but the Entity is one, without doubt.¹⁶²

A *barzakb*, which literally means “isthmus,” is something that separates and is an intermediary between two things. Although one of its function is to separate, but it has another function that of combining and bringing together the qualities of the two things it separates. When we study the nature of all things in the cosmos, we realize that each one of them is a *barzakb*. Everything that is present in creation is placed in between two aspects of reality. “There is nothing in existence but *barzakbs*, since a *barzakb* is the arrangement of one thing between two other things..., and existence has no edges (*taraf*)”.¹⁶³ Existence itself is a *barzakb* situated between Sheer Being and Nothingness.

The Arabic word that Ibn al-‘Arabī uses for the concept of existence is *wujūd*. Ibn al-‘Arabī says, “The Real is identical with *wujūd*.”¹⁶⁴ *Wujūd* is the word used by Ibn al-‘Arabī to mean, not just “existence”, or “being” but also “finding” and “awareness.” “In actual fact *wujūd* is identical with the Real, not other than He.”¹⁶⁵

Wujūd when referring to God represents the true and actual reality of God. Following the example of Muslim Peripatetic philosophers he uses the term *wājib al-wujūd*, Necessary Being to refer to God’s *wujūd*.¹⁶⁶ The word is used metaphorically when it refers to anything other than God. Categorically

¹⁶² *Futuḥāt* III 289.1. Cf. Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*. p. 176-177.

¹⁶³ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futuḥāt* III 156.27. Cf. Chittick. *SPK*, p. 14.

¹⁶⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futuḥāt* I 328.250. Cf. Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, p 12.

¹⁶⁵ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futuḥāt* III 566.30, Cf. Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, p 12.

¹⁶⁶ Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 12.

speaking only God has *wujūd* and others do not exist. It is only God Who has knowledge and awareness of all things, is found in all things and finds Himself in all things. God lends *wujūd* to all creatures. They have existence only through Him.

On the other hand non-existence is an integral quality of everything other than God. All things that have been created have no claim to existence in themselves. God brings them into existence through His own *wujūd*. Therefore creativity takes place when God lends His *wujūd* to all of creation. In itself everything other than God is characterized by non-existence. God is the Ultimate Creator Who creates everything through His Own *wujūd*. Everything in existence displays the characteristics of its *barzakhī* reality, He/ Not He, for although it has found existence, in its root, it has no existence whatsoever of its own.

Ibn al-ʿArabī alludes to this realm of existence/ the *barzakh* as the feminine principle through whom creativity takes place, in a number of ways. For example, when he discusses the four elements of air, water, earth, and fire, which constitute the pillars of the cosmos, he alludes to the feminine aspect of their existence because they have an active and a receptive dimension. Ibn al-ʿArabī writes:

God has made each of the four pillars both producer of effects and receptive towards effects. The root of this in the divine knowledge is His words, “When My servants question thee about Me-surely I am near, I respond to the call of the caller when he calls to Me.” [Qurʾān, 2:186] When anything in the cosmos is receptive towards effects, this derives from the divine response. As for the divine root of the active, that is obvious to everyone. We call attention to something only when most people may remain heedless of it.¹⁶⁷

Ibn al-ʿArabī is aware that the majority of the people remain unaware of the reality that the feminine characteristic of receptivity, which in turn also has the power of creative activity, is as much a divine characteristic as the

¹⁶⁷ Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futuḥāt*. II 453.16. Cf. Murata, *op.cit.*, p. 208.

masculine characteristic of activity. Most Muslims have no doubts regarding the fact that all activity in the cosmos is God's activity, but very few are aware that all receptivity is God's receptivity as well.

The Sharī'ah maintains the "patriarchal" conception of God, which is necessary for everyone, but for those who seek nearness of their Lord, the "matriarchal" conception of God in following the spiritual path, the *ṭarīqah* becomes a must.¹⁶⁸ The seekers start becoming aware of God's response to their calling. Their innermost desires, through the power of *himma* start materializing. Their nearness to God is strengthened and their very prayers start becoming creative for they are with that aspect of God, which is proclaimed in the verse, "I respond to the call of the caller when he calls to me." [Qur'ān 2:186]

Ibn al-ʿArabī's works and the works of his followers provide ample evidence that all of existence displays the feminine characteristics of God's mercy. *Wujūd* or existence, which is known as "Unbounded Imagination" (*barzakh*) is receptive to all properties that are manifested within it. Therefore in its essential receptivity, existence is feminine. ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī, who is one of the most well known interpreters of Ibn al-ʿArabī's philosophy writes:

God is called "All-Merciful" in as much as He spreads His non-delimited *wujūd* over the things that become manifest through His manifestation. For Mercy is *wujūd* itself, and the "All-Merciful" is the Real in as much as He is a *wujūd* spread over everything that becomes manifest through Him and inasmuch as He possesses through His *wujūd* the perfection of receptivity towards every property in every time and in accordance with every level-properties that rule over every state.¹⁶⁹

God's Mercy through whom the whole of existence came into being is a feminine characteristic, which encompasses everything in creation.

¹⁶⁸ Murata, *op.cit.*, p. 208.

¹⁶⁹ Qūnawī, *Iḥāz al-bayān fi tarwīl umm al-Qur'ān*, p. 382. Cf. Murata, *Tao*. p. 206.

“Sheer Being” as The Creative Masculine Principle and “Manyness of Knowledge” as The Creative Feminine / Principle.

The polarity, which caused the beginning of the process of creation, is the one found between God as “Sheer Being” (*al-wujūd al-mahd*) and “nothingness”. A relationship made possible by the macrocosmic *barzakh* that stands between the two. This *barzakh* is called a variety of names by Ibn al-ʿArabī, including the “Supreme Barzakh” (*al-barzakh al-ʿalā*), “Non-delimited Imagination”, the “Cloud” “the Breath of the All-Merciful”, the “the Real Through Whom Creation Takes Place”, “Nature”, and the “Reality of the Perfect Man”.¹⁷⁰ It is to be distinguished from the microcosmic *barzakh*, or the imaginal world, which is present between the spirit and the body.

When the Real brought the cosmos into existence, He opened up His Form within the “Cloud” (*amā*), which is the Breath of the All Merciful, i.e. the Real through whom takes place the creation of the levels and entities of the cosmos.¹⁷¹

According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, the Cloud is identical with the Real Through Whom Creation Takes Place (*al-Ḥaqq al-makblūq bihi*) and with the Breath of the All-Merciful. He believes that it is the “Real” because it is identical with the Breath, which in itself is hidden within the Breather.¹⁷² Thus the Real Through Whom Creation Takes Place is the feminine principle of existence because it is manifesting the feminine characteristic of God’s Mercy.

Ibn al-ʿArabī believed that the Real Through Whom Creation Takes Place is the Lord of the Throne who encompasses everything in creation. God in this aspect of the Supreme *Barzakh* and the Real Through Whom Creation

¹⁷⁰ Chittick, *SPK*, p. 125.

¹⁷¹ Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futuḥāt*, II 391.33. Cf. Chittick, *SPK*, p. 133-134.

¹⁷² Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futuḥāt*, II 310.25. Cf. Chittick, *SPK*, p. 134

Takes Place manifests the feminine principle of receptivity without which nothing would come into existence. Ibn al-ʿArabī writes:

That within which the existence of the cosmos has become manifest is the Real; it becomes manifest only within the Breath of the All-Merciful, which is the Cloud. So it is the Real, the Lord of the Throne, who gave the throne its all-encompassing shape, since it encompasses all things. Hence the root within which the forms of the cosmos become manifest encompasses everything in the world of corporeal bodies. This is nothing other than the Real Through Whom Creation Takes Place. Through this receptivity, it is like a container within which comes out into the open (*burūz*) the existence of everything it includes, layer upon layer, entity after entity, in a wise hierarchy (*al-tartīb al-hikamī*). So it brings out into the open that which had been unseen within it in order to witness it.¹⁷³

It is to be noticed that The Real Through Whom Creation Takes Place is the feminine/receptive principle of existence and it is likened to a “container” within which takes place the existence of all creation.

Though the concept of *tawhīd* in Islam upholds God to be one and only one, but everything other than God is two or more. This is an important realization for understanding the significance of the creative, masculine and creative, feminine principles in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s school of thought. The *Ikhwān al-ṣafā* stress the three Qurānic verses which point to “two of every kind”. God commanded *Noah* that he must in the Ark: transport “two of every kind” (11:40).

Everything below God is “two of every kind”, since He is the One, the Unique, the Everlasting, “who did not give birth and was not born” (112:3).¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Ibn al-ʿArabī, *al-Futuḥāt*, II 563.19. Cf. Chittick, SPK, p. 134.

¹⁷⁴ *Ikhwān al-ṣafā*, Jamiat al-jamia, ed. Arif Tamir, Dār Maktaba al-Ḥayāt, p. 79.

Muslim authorities distinguish between God in His Essence as the God that is beyond human understanding and God who has *relationships* or *relations* (*nisba*) with His creation. Relationships (*nisba*) and duality, including the duality of the masculine and feminine principles of existence have to be taken into account as soon as we conceive of the reality of God as Divinity and his cosmos. Ibn al-ʿArabī says:

Once God has created the cosmos, we see that it possesses diverse levels and realities. Each of these demands a specific relationship with the Real. Examples of these intelligible qualities include creation, provision, gain, loss; brining into existence, specification, strengthening, domination, severity, gentleness.¹⁷⁵

The relationship that each of these levels and realities demand from God fall under either the masculine/Majestic/active qualities of God or the feminine/Beautiful/receptive qualities of God.

At the deepest level the undifferentiation and Oneness of God is the “Sheer Being” (*al-wujūd al-mahd*). “Sheer Being,” in Islamic thought is described as that which makes others manifest while not manifesting itself.¹⁷⁶ Like spiritual “Light” which allows us to see other things but remains invisible in itself. “Sheer Being” (*al-wujūd al-mahd*) is unseen in itself while it manifests the realities of all things, other than itself.¹⁷⁷ It possesses activity in Its Oneness in relation to the receptivity of the manyness of creation. Therefore Being (*wujūd*) is predominantly a masculine quality as through activity, it manifests the existence of all other than itself.

The cosmos is predominantly feminine in character for it is the locus of activity ie, it receives the activity of Being. Saʿīd al-Dīn Farghānī (d. 695/1296) belongs to Ibn al-ʿArabī’s school as he was the follower of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s stepson ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d. 673/1274). He explains the

¹⁷⁵ Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futuḥāt*, 111 441.31. Cf. Chittick, SPK. p. 66.

¹⁷⁶ Mutata, *op. cit.*, p. 66

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

masculine and feminine principles of existence as follows, “Activity (*fā’iliyya*) pertains to oneness, and receptivity (*qābiliyya*) pertains to manyness”.¹⁷⁸

“Sheer Being” can be compared to pure light as compared to everything else in creation which is a mixture of light and darkness. Apart from the quality of “Sheer Being” God has the quality of possessing all knowledge of all his creation. Farghānī observes that existence is governed by these two principles: The Oneness of being and the Manyness of knowledge (*kathrat al-ilm*). He says: “Both the Oneness of Being and the Manyness of knowledge through its objects are attributes of the Essence in respect of It’s non-delimitation and nonentification.”¹⁷⁹

“Sheer Being” is totally undifferentiated and so it is One, whereas knowledge pertains to many things and therefore it is differentiated.¹⁸⁰ Therefore, Being is the masculine quality and divine knowledge is a feminine quality. It is with the interaction and relationship between these two qualities of God that the whole creation comes into existence.¹⁸¹

Though the “Sheer Being” is the active quality, without the complementary quality of Manyness of knowledge, nothing in creation could have come into existence. In reality both these principles refer to levels (*martaba*) or presences (*ḥadra*), which can be distinguished only theoretically but cannot be distinguished ontologically. Both these principles pre-exist in the Essence of God at the level of the Unity of All-comprehensiveness (*maqām al-jam*).¹⁸²

Before the level of Divinity we have the level of the Unity of all-Comprehensiveness, where the Oneness of Being and the Manyness of

¹⁷⁸ Maktab al-Sanā’ī, Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 66.

¹⁷⁹ Farghānī, *Mashariq al-darārī*, p. 345. Cf. Murata, *Tao*, p. 67.

¹⁸⁰ Murato, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

¹⁸¹ Murato, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

¹⁸² Farghānī, *Mashariq al-darārī*, p. 344. Cf. Murata, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

Knowledge are identical with each other...Within this Presence, oneness and manyness, Being and Knowledge, entification and nonentification are all identical with each other and with the Essence, without any kind of separation or distinction.¹⁸³

In order to understand why the feminine and masculine principle of existence were differentiated and why creation took place when God in His Essence was absolutely Self-contained and undifferentiated, we will turn to the tradition of The “Hidden Treasure.” Ibn al-‘Arabī refers to this tradition often, to elaborate his views.

The Hadith of the “Hidden Treasure”

In the beginning there was only God and nothing else existed beside Him. Al-Bukhari quotes this *hadith*: “God was and there was nothing other than He.”¹⁸⁴

At this stage the names and attributes of God are only possibilities or virtualities inherent within His Oneness. They are indistinguishable attributes within the Unity of God. God is Alive, Desiring, Knowing, Powerful etc., and each of these names apply only to the One Reality as yet. There is no multiplicity; there is no creation at this point.

Muslim cosmologists often quote the following *hadith* to explain the reason for creation. David, the prophet, asked God, “Why didst thou create the creatures?” He replied, “I was a hidden treasure and I wanted [literally “loved”] to be known. Hence I created the creatures so that I might be known”.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Farghānī, *Mashariq al-darārī*, p. 344. Cf. Murata, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

¹⁸⁴ Bukhārī, *Al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, “Tawhid”, 22. Cf. Murata, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁸⁵ Not found in the standard *Hadith* texts but found in many Sufi references Ibn al-‘Arabī writes that it is “sound on the basis of unveiling (i.e. mystical vision), but not established by way of transmission” *Futuḥāt* II 399.28.

The jewels that were hidden within the Divine chest of hidden treasure were the names and attributes still undifferentiated from the Unity of All comprehensiveness (*ahadiyyat al-jam*). Names such as Alive, Desiring, Knowing, Powerful, Merciful, Vengeful, Wrathful, Loving, Hearing, Seeing and so on are present within God but are not manifest and not distinguishable from God Himself. These names, at this stage are identical with God and with each other. Therefore the Forgiving is identical with the Avenger, the Merciful with the Wrathful and the Gentle with the Severe. But in order for these names to become known and distinguishable from one another, God created the cosmos.

All of creation is a *tajalli* (manifestation) of God and He created it so that He may be known. Muslim scholars interpret the *hadith* of the Hidden Treasure with regard to the two active and receptive principles that come into play as soon as creation taken place. Rumi interprets this *hadith* as follows:

God says, “I was a hidden treasure, so I wanted to be known”. In other words, “I created the whole of the universe, and the goal in all of it is to make Myself manifest, sometimes through gentleness and sometimes through severity”. God is not the kind of king for whom a single herald would be sufficient. If all the atoms of the universes were His heralds, they would be incapable of making Him known adequately.¹⁸⁶

Gentleness here mentioned, is a feminine quality and severity is a masculine quality. Ahmad Sam‘ānī alludes to the Hidden Treasure, when he stresses the polarity present within the names and attributes of God. He especially mentions the polarity between gentleness and severity, beauty and majesty under which most Muslim authorities divide and classify the different names and attributes of God. Again, these names of majesty and beauty fall under the masculine and feminine characteristics. Sam‘ānī *says*:

O dervish! He has a gentleness and a severity to perfection, a majesty and a beauty to perfection. He wanted to distribute these treasures. On one

¹⁸⁶ Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi* Edited by B. Furuzanfar Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1969. Cf. Chittick, p. 48

person's head He placed the crown of gentleness in the garden of bounty. On another person's liver He placed the brand of severity in the prison of justice. He melts one in the fire for majesty. He caresses another in the light of beauty.¹⁸⁷

The attributes of God, which fall under the general masculine characteristics are, severity (*qabr*), wrath (*ghadab*), justice (*ʿadl*), anger (*sakbat*), vengeance (*intiqām*), holiness (*quddūs*), invincibility (*jabarūt*), inaccessibility (*ʾiḥṣā*) and magnificence (*keibriyā*) and other such qualities denoting God's incomparability with the whole of creation.¹⁸⁸ The followers of the philosophic tradition of *Kalām* and those who advocate the strict observance of the laws of *Shari'ah* usually concentrate and give stress to these majestic qualities of God which bring home the message of the absolute Transcendence of God with regard to the cosmos. God is completely other than the cosmos and therefore the place of the human being in creation is to believe in and acknowledge this total separation from the transcendental *Allah*. Their place is to submit (Islam) peacefully to the will of God, with the fear and awe of God in their souls.

This attitude of fear and awe of God reflects *tanẓīh* ie, incomparability and transcendence of God. But within the Islamic spiritual tradition, God's similarity to His creation has also been stressed and is known by the concept of the *tashbih* (similarity). The qualities that are in line with similarity are beauty (*jamāl*), mercy (*rahmah*), bounty (*fadl*), forgiveness (*maghfirah*), nearness (*qurb*), good-pleasure (*ridā*), pardon (*ʿafw*), gentleness (*luṭf*) and love (*maḥabbah*).¹⁸⁹

The Sufis have developed their own advance spiritual psychology, according to which the human response to the masculine, majestic (*jalālī*) and the overpowering qualities of God is fear (*kehamf*), awe (*hayba*) and contraction (*qabd*). In the same manner the human response to the feminine, gentle and

¹⁸⁷ Samʿānī, *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ fī sharḥ asmā al-malik al-fattāh*, Edited by N. Mayil Hirawi. Tehran: Intisharat-i Ilmi wa Farhangi, 1368/1989 p. 17. Cf. *Tao*. p. 61.

¹⁸⁸ Murata, *Tao*, p. 69.

¹⁸⁹ Murata, *Tao*, p. 69.

beautiful qualities of God are hope (*rija*), intimacy (*ums*) and expansion (*bas*).¹⁹⁰

It is at this juncture that the interplay of feminine and masculine qualities can be shown to manifest complex, creative, yet harmonious relationships. With regard to the masculine majestic qualities of God, the human response is expected by the *Sharīah* to be full of submission, receptivity and peaceful resignation to the Active will of Allah. The whole concept of Islam, in its aspect of submission to Allah, denotes an attitude, which is essentially feminine in nature. The overriding quality that is stressed by the proponents of *Sharīah* is the feminine character trait of submission.

On the other hand, the Beautiful and Gentle qualities of God are qualities that empower the heart and spirit to actively seek nearness (*qurb*), intimacy (*ums*) and expansion (*bas*). Once the human being has achieved nearness and intimacy through submission (Islam) he or she is clothed in the robes of the vicegerent of God in the cosmos.

With regard to the King the vicegerent is always submissive and so follows the feminine character traits but with regard to the whole of the cosmos he/she has been given the power to govern, to display the masculine, active, majestic, character traits. Therefore the one individual, who has been invested with the vicegerency, displays both the feminine and masculine character traits as can be evidenced in the description of the perfect spiritual master by Najm al-Dīn Kubrā:

Through these two wings, the shaykh deviates from the straight path and also goes straight. Sometimes the attributes of beauty disclose themselves to him, that is, bounty, mercy, gentleness, and generosity. Thus he is immersed in intimacy. Sometimes the attributes of majesty disclose themselves to him, that is, power, tremendousness, magnificence, inaccessibility, chastisement, and intense assault. Then he is immersed in awe. Sometimes the attributes mix, so he witnesses both intimacy and awe. The attributes mix only when

¹⁹⁰ Murata, *Tao*, p. 69.

the Divine Essence discloses itself, since the Essence is the mother of the attributes, bringing all of them together.¹⁹¹

It may be pointed out that these relations are never hard and fast. The polarities inherent in the feminine and masculine character traits get intermingled in the whole interplay of the cosmos where God's wrath can very well be hiding His Mercy and God's Mercy could well be veiling His Majesty.¹⁹²

In Islamic jurisprudence and the tradition of *Kalām* most of the stress is laid on *tanẓīh* i.e. the quality of human distance from God and the appropriate human response of fear and awe. In Sufism and other Islamic branches of knowledge emphasis is laid on *tashbīh* (similarity) between God and the cosmos and the quality of “nearness after distance, or nearness along with distance. God is seen as primarily near and secondarily far. The goal of submission and servanthood is to re-establish the right relationships so that distance and nearness can play their proper roles”.¹⁹³

‘Alī Hujwārī (d. ca. 456/1072) establishes the importance of the contrasting qualities of intimacy and awe, feminine and masculine character traits respectively. In his famous treatise on Sufism called the *Kashf al-Mahjūb* he explains that awe is the correct attitude for the soul as the soul emerges from the darker, lower and ignorant aspect of the human beings, whereas intimacy is the correct attitude for the spirit as the spirit emerges from the luminous, higher and enlightened aspect. He writes:

The authority of awe rules over the soul and its caprice. It annihilates our mortal nature. But the authority of intimacy rules over the inmost mystery and nurtures knowledge. Hence through disclosing Himself in majesty, the Real annihilates the souls of His friends. Through disclosing Himself

¹⁹¹ Kubra, *Die Fawa'ib al-Gamal des Naqm ad-Din Kubra*. Edition and study by F. Meir. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1957, 46.]

¹⁹². For a more detailed analysis of the interrelatedness of the feminine and masculine character traits, see Sachiko Murata's, *The Tao of Islam*, p. 70.

¹⁹³ Murata, *Tao*, p. 70.

in beauty, He causes their inmost mysteries to subsist. Hence, those who were people of annihilation placed awe first, while those who are masters of subsistence preferred intimacy.¹⁹⁴

God is the One Creator whose active will lead to the creation of the whole of the cosmos. The cosmos with respect to God is totally dependant on God and displays the feminine quality of receptivity and submission (*islām*). The Qurān explains, “To God prostrate themselves all whose are in the heavens, and every creature crawling on earth... (16:49). “To Him is submitted everyone in the heavens and the earth” (3:83). But within the cosmos God displays his creativity by creating pairs of every kind. And it is through these pairs or polarities, masculine and feminine, active and receptive that the creation is an ongoing process. Therefore creativity can be said to have a masculine and a feminine dimension. In fact both these dimensions are necessary for any creativity to place just as in the human realm a male and female are necessary for completing the creative reproductive process. Similarly in all other dimension the active and receptive principles interact for creativity to take place.

The Creative Feminine Principle and the Breath of the All-Merciful

God’s name Allah is considered as the supreme and all comprehensive name in Islam. All names refer back to it. But the Qurān also says, “Call upon Allah, or call upon the All-Merciful whichever you call, to Him belong the names most beautiful” (Qurān 17:110). This verse mentions the all-comprehensive name of Allah and by placing the name All-Merciful alongside the name of Allah it alludes to the fact that the name All-Merciful is all-comprehensive as well. Another verse in the Qurān verifies this reality: “My mercy embraces all things” (Qurān 7:156).

For Ibn al-‘Arabī and his school the Breath of the All-Merciful is the substance of creation, the pure mercy out of which all creatures are constituted. He quotes two *ḥadīth* reports to verify this concept: “Do not

¹⁹⁴ Hujwiri, *Kashf al-Matjūb*, pp. 376-77.

curse the wind for it derives from the Breath of the All-Merciful!” and “I find the Breath of the All-Merciful coming to me from the direction of Yemen”¹⁹⁵.

Ibn al-‘Arabī points out that in both instances the word *nafs* points to a kind of *tanfīs* (a word which comes from the same root) which means to air, to comfort, to cheer up, to relieve and to remove sorrow.¹⁹⁶

All existent things in the creation are the words of God emerging from the Breath of the All-Merciful. Ibn al-‘Arabī illustrates this point:

God says, “Our only speech to a thing when we desire it” – here “Our speech” refers to the fact that He is a speaker (*mutakallim*) – “is to say to it ‘Be!’” (16:40). “Be!” is exactly what He speaks. Through it that to which He says “Be!” becomes manifest. Thereby the entities become manifest within the Breath of the All-Merciful, just as letters become manifest within the human breath. The thing that comes to be is a specific form, like a form painted upon wood.¹⁹⁷

Therefore all of existence can be perceived as the articulation of the words of the Breath of the All-Merciful. With respect to the Breath, which precedes creation, the Breath is the active, masculine creative principle, which brings things into existence. But with respect to the fact that the thing comes into existence and is differentiated by manifesting the Breath as an articulated reality ie, a word and a specific form, the Breath displays the feminine characteristic of receptivity. Without this feminine aspect of the Breath of the All-Merciful, no creation would take place.

All things in the cosmos are the words of God that receive their being

¹⁹⁵ First *hadīth*: Ibn Māja, *Adab* 29, Aḥmad II 268, 409, 518; V 123; Cf. Tirmidhī, *Fitan* 65, Abū Dāwūd, *Adab* 104; Aḥmad, II 437. Second *hadīth*: Aḥmad, II 541.

¹⁹⁶ Lane gives *nafas* as a synonym for *tanfīs*, citing the above *hadīths* as examples (*Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v. *nafas*). Chittick, *SPK*, p. 127.

¹⁹⁷ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futuḥāt al-makkiyya*, II 401.29. Cf. Chittick, *SPK*, p. 128.

from God's own Breath. All of creation displays its feminine aspect by its receptivity and utter dependence upon God's mercy. "Existence itself is a mercy for every existent thing".¹⁹⁸

The Creative Feminine Principle and the Supreme Barzakh/ Universal Nature:

The articulated words of God result in the creation of all that is, including the Supreme *Barzakh*/ Universal Nature. Ibn al-ʿArabī discusses Universal Nature as a reality that is primarily receptive. He places Nature in a polarity with the Spirit, which is primarily active and masculine in essence. He makes it clear that this active dimension of the Spirit is inseparable from the receptive dimension of Nature. The activity of the Spirit finds a means of expression in the receptivity of Nature. Just as the relationship between the Creator and creation is reciprocal for without creation there would be no Creator, similarly Nature has an effect on the Spirit. The realm of the Spirit is also known as the world of Command (*ʿalam-al-amr*). Ibn al-ʿArabī says:

A woman in relation to a man is like Nature in relation to the Divine Command, since the woman is the locus for the existence of the children, just as Nature in relation to the Divine Command (*al-amr al-ilābī*), is the locus of manifestation for the entities of the corporeal bodies. Through Nature they are engendered and from it they become manifest. So there can be no command without Nature and no Nature without command. Hence engendered existence depends upon both... He who knows the level of Nature knows the level of the woman, and he who knows the Divine Command knows the level of the man and the fact that the existence of all existent things other than God depends upon these two realities.¹⁹⁹

Nature, compared to the woman is contrasted with the Spirit, compared to the man, provides the Macrocosmic Womb within which all corporeal bodies originate, are brought into existence and nurtured.

¹⁹⁸Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futuḥāt*, II 281.27. Cf. Chittick, *SPK*, p. 130.

¹⁹⁹ Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futuḥāt*, III 90.18,28. Cf. Chittick, *SPK*, p. 141.

Ibn al-ʿArabī employs the terms wife and husband to explain the underlying relationship between Nature and the World of the Command.

When a natural form that has the receptivity to be governed becomes manifest and when a particular soul becomes manifest governing it, the form is like the female, while the governing spirit is like the male. Hence the form is the wife while the spirit is the husband.²⁰⁰

Human beings are permeated by the qualities of both the masculine principle i.e. the world of the command or spirit and the feminine principle i.e. the world of the soul or Nature. Ibn al-ʿArabī explains how these two principles interact in the context of the male principle being represented by the father and the female principle being represented by the mother. “The spirits are all fathers, while Nature is the Mother, since it is the locus of transmutations”²⁰¹ Ibn al-ʿArabī believes that Nature is the “highest and greatest mother, (*al-umm al-ʿāliyāt al-kubrā*)”²⁰² through whom the birth of everything in the cosmos takes place, whereas she herself remains unseen. The Supreme *Barzakh* is also called by various other significant names or synonyms, such as the Reality of the Perfect Man and Muhammadan Reality. Both these synonyms point to the predominantly receptive feminine attribute of submitting to the active masculine World of Command or World of Spirit. The Reality of the Perfect Man and the Muhammadan Reality are realities that are completely submissive (*muslim*) to the Will and Command of Alalh. But within the attributes of Universal Nature/ the Universal Soul/ the Reality of the Perfect man and Muhammadan Reality is also the attribute of being active and therefore masculine with respect to everything else in creation because everything else in creation is submissive towards it

The Creative Feminine Principle and the Macrocosmic Womb

According to a certain perspective, the father who is the symbol of the spirit has a greater claim upon the child (human being), than the mother, due

²⁰⁰ Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futuḥāt*, III 99.7. Cf. Murata, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

²⁰¹ Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥa*, I 138.29. Cf. Chittick, *SPK*, p. 142.

²⁰² Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futuḥāt*, I V 150.15. Cf. Chittick, *SPK*, p. 140.

to the spirit's ontological pre-eminence.²⁰³ But the Islamic perspective emphasizes loving kindness, honour and respect for the mother to the extent that the mother is given a higher place of reverence in human relations even than the one given to the father.²⁰⁴

The mother epitomizes the nurturing, loving, caring, affectionate, merciful, forgiving, gentle, beautiful and creative qualities of God, on earth. In fact, the mother represents Universal Nature, the earth, and the Macrocosmic Womb, which was created by God for the creation of everything in existence.

This aspect of giving the mother or the Macrocosmic Womb/Nature a higher status in Islam is a point of great significance for it is here that Islam parts company with those religious belief systems, which condemn this world and Nature as inherently bad and evil. From the Islamic perspective Nature with all its bounties, is inherently good. This earth and this body is the locus of manifestation of God's own names and qualities, therefore it is a divine gift. Marriage is also inherently good for it allows the masculine and feminine principles inherent in both the man and the woman to interact harmoniously with each other. The marriage relationship is meant to be creative not only at the level of procreation but also at the psychological and spiritual level.

The mother has a claim over human loving kindness and regard, in some respects, greater than the claim of the father as expressed in the following famous *hadith*:

Someone once asked the Prophet, "Among people, who is most deserving of loving kindness (*birr*)?" He answered, "Your mother". The questioner asked, "After her, who?" He replied, "Your mother". He asked "After her, who?" He said, "Your mother. Then your father".²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Murata, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

²⁰⁴ Murata, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

²⁰⁵ Muslim, *Birr* I, Bukhārī, *Al-Sahīh*, *Adab* 2; Tirmidhī *Birr* I, Abū Dāwūd, *Adab* 120; Ibn Māja, *Adab* I, Aḥmad V 3,5.

The rights of the mother have been given their due significance by the Prophet's great-grandson, 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn:

The right of your mother is that you know that she carried you where none carries anyone, she gave to you that fruit of her heart that which no one gives to anyone, and she protected you with all her organs. She did not care if she went hungry as long as you ate, if she was thirsty as long as you drank, if she was naked as long as you were clothed, if she was in the sun as long as you were in the shade. She gave up sleep for your sake, she protected you from the heat and cold, in order that you might belong to her. You will not be able to show her gratitude, unless through God's help and giving success.²⁰⁶

Ibn al-'Arabī believed that women could attain the highest of spiritual stations even to extent of becoming the pole (*quṭb*). The pole (*quṭb*) in Islamic spirituality is the supreme spiritual governor of the age, around whose axis the universe rotates and upon whom the actual existence of the cosmos depends. The pole is the perfected human being who reflects God's attributes and names so perfectly that he or she is given the vicegerancy of the universe. Ibn al-'Arabī states:

Women share with men in all levels, even in being pole... If the only thing that had reached us concerning this matter were the words of the Prophet, "Women are the likes of men," that would be enough, since it means that everything to which man can attain – stations, levels or attributes – can also belong to any woman whom God wills just as it can belong to any man whom God wills.

Do you not notice God's wisdom in the extra which He has given to the woman over the man in the name? Concerning the male human being, He says *mar*, and concerning the female He says, *marā*, so He added an *a* or an *at* in contradistinction– to the name *mar*' given to man. Hence she has a degree over the man in this station, degree not possessed by him, in

²⁰⁶ 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn, *The Psalms of Islam: al-ṣaḥīfa al-Sajjādiyya*. Translated by Chittick. p. 287.

contradistinction to the degree given to men in the verse, “Men have a degree above them” (2:228). Hence God blocked that gap [alluded to in the verse] with this extra in *marā*.²⁰⁷

In Islam there is an emphasis laid on observing the rights of “womb relatives”. Even the word womb (*rahm*) has been derived from the same linguistic root as the word *rahma* which means mercy and which is God’s intrinsic quality. “My Mercy encompassed all things” (7:156), are the words of the Qur’ān. The womb is the receptacle where the young originate and are nurtured until they are mature enough for birth. In Arabic, this word also means kinship, a blood tie or a close family relationship. *Rahma* signifies mercy, compassion, pity, tenderness and attentiveness towards someone whom one favours. It is the natural inclination of loving tenderness, which a mother displays towards her child.²⁰⁸

The relationship between mercy and womb is obvious from the linguistic and symbolic connection between *rahma* and *rahm*. There are four different *hadith* reports of the Prophet Muhammad that uphold the connection between God’s Mercy and the womb. For our purpose we look at the womb as the macrocosmic receptacle where all creativity takes place. It is the aspect of God’s creativity that highlights the feminine principle inherent within the creative process. For without God’s all-embracing mercy nothing would be created.

The womb present within the woman is a perfect microcosmic reflection of the Macrocosmic Womb of Nature that encompasses all of existence. Every single entity from the depths of which another entity originates and emerges is a womb. From this perspective it becomes obvious that everything in the universe is present within a womb, before its birth or creation. The Macrocosmic Womb symbolizes the all-embracing dome of God’s mercy and is synonymous with the *barzakh* reality. Just like the dome of the mosque symbolically nurtures and envelopes the spiritual aspirations

²⁰⁷ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futuḥāt*, III 89.22. Cf. Murata, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

²⁰⁸ Murata, *op. cit.*, 215.

of Muslim worshipers, the dome of God's macrocosmic Mercy i.e. Nature, becomes the receptacle for the manifestations of God's names and attributes.

The relationship between God's Mercy, the Macrocosmic Womb, Nature and the creative feminine principle, becomes apparent through the following four *ḥadīth* reports regarding the "womb":

1. God said, "I am God and I am the All-Merciful. I created the womb and I gave it a name derived from My own name. Hence if someone cuts off the womb, I will cut him off, but if someone joins the womb, I will join him to me".²⁰⁹
2. God created the creatures. When He finished with them, the womb stood up and seized the All-Merciful by the belt. The All-Merciful said, "what is this?" It replied, "This is the station of whoever seeks refuge from being cut off". God said, "Indeed it is. Will you not be satisfied that I join him who joins you and cut him off who cuts you off?" The womb replied, "Yes, I will". God said, "Then that is yours".²¹⁰
3. The womb is attached to the Throne and says, "If someone joins me. Let God join him, but if someone cuts me off, let God cut him off".²¹¹
4. The womb is a branch of the All-Merciful. God said to it, "When a person joins you, I will join him, but when a person cuts you off, I will cut him off".²¹²

ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī gives a detailed commentary on the *ḥadīth* reports of the womb given above. He does not believe that these *ḥadīth* reports emphasize, only the importance of family relationships. The significance of family ties is definitely implied, yet the *ḥadīth* reports *have* symbolic meanings pointing to certain cosmological realities. Three of these four *ḥadīth* reports *are ḥadīth qudsī*, i.e. the Prophet is quoting the words of God Himself.

²⁰⁹ Aḥmad Ibn Hanbal I 191, 194.

²¹⁰ Muslim Birr 16; Bukhārī, Tafsīr sura 47, Tawhīd 35; Aḥmad II 330, 383, 406.

²¹¹ Muslim, Birr 17; Aḥmad II 163, 190, 193, 209]

²¹² Bukhārī, Adab 13, Tirmidhī, Birr 16; Aḥmad I 190, 321; II 295, 382, 406, 455, 498.

Qūnawī, in his commentary on these *ḥadīth* reports, identifies the womb with nature and with the verse of the Qurān: “The All-Merciful sat upon the Throne. (20:5). This verse is interpreted by Ibn al-ʿArabī and his followers (including Qūnawī) to mean that God, who is Being (*wujūd*) envelops the universe through His All-Merciful Breath.²¹³

Qūnawī interprets the *ḥadīth* of the womb in the following manner:

Womb” is a name for the reality of Nature... The womb in “attached to the Throne” in the respect that in the view of those who verifying the truth, all existent corporeal bodies arte natural, while the throne is the first of these corporal bodies. Reports of the *Sharāḥ* have come concerning this fact, and the unveilings of the perfect human beings all give witness to its correctness.

The womb is a “branch of the All-Merciful” because mercy is identical with existence, since it is mercy that “embraces all things”. Nothing embraces all things except existence, since it embraces everything, even that which is called “non existence”.²¹⁴

The word “witness” (*maʿīyya*) has been taken from the Qurān where God says about Himself, “He [God] is with you wherever you are (57:4) whether in the spirit or in the body. God’s Presence covers all levels of reality, even the level of the Macrocosmic Womb. Qūnawī uses the *ḥadīth* of the womb to give evidence for the Islamic belief of holding this corporeal world, marriage, the marriage act and reproduction, in high esteem.²¹⁵

Before the birth into this world, the human spirit is undifferentiated from its one source. When the spirit enters the body, only then, it becomes distinct, differentiated, separate and individualized. The body or the corporeal realm is feminine in its characteristic of receptivity towards the spirit.

²¹³ Qūnawī, *Sharḥ al-ḥadīth*, no. 20. Cf. Murata, *op. cit.*, p. 221

²¹⁴ Qūnawī, *Sharḥ al-ḥadīth*, no. 20. Cf. Murata, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

²¹⁵ Murata, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

Only after this separation and individualization, can the spirit have knowledge and awareness of itself and others, since things become known through their opposites. It is through the opposition between heaven and earth, light and darkness, existence and non-existence that each of these opposite entities is recognized and identified.

The whole body of Nature, the Macrocosmic Womb manifests God's Hidden Treasure. Rumi mentions this same concept when he says: "The body did not exist and I was a spirit with thee in heaven; between us was none of my speaking and listening".²¹⁶ Speaking and listening takes place between entities that are separate and are aware of each other. Without being born into the natural sphere, which is the sphere of the feminine "womb", the spirits remain in a state of non-awareness. It is only when they are sent to this world that "The birds of consciousness... realize the worth of union with God and to see the pain of separation from Him".²¹⁷

Human beings are capable of becoming God's vicegerents on earth due to their two fold nature, one of which is immersed in the spiritual world and the other is immersed in the corporeal world. Human beings have greater knowledge and awareness due to the fact that they replicate, in microscopic form, the macroscopic nature of the ultimate reality, in both its spiritual, active, invisible masculine aspect as well as its corporeal, receptive visible and feminine aspect. Qūnawī writes that the perfect human beings actualize their *barzakhi* realities by honouring the "womb" which represents the feminine principle of imagination.

To "join the womb" is to recognize its position and to honour its measure... Through the natural configuration and the characteristics, faculties and instruments that God placed within it, the human being brings together both spiritual and natural characteristics, properties and perfections. Through this bringing together, he is able to seek access to the realization of the *barzakhi* reality that encompasses the properties of necessity and possibility. Thereby his conformity [with the Real] is perfected and his parallelism [with Him] is established. He becomes

²¹⁶ Rūmī, *Dīwān*, 19132. Cf. Chittick, SPL. p. 70.

²¹⁷ Rūmī, *Dīwān*, 7192-94 Cf. Chittick, SPL. p. 70.

manifest of the Divine Presence and the form of the whole cosmos, both outwardly and inwardly. So understand! These are some of the properties of its joining that can be mentioned.²¹⁸

From the above passage it becomes clear that the human reality reflects the *barzakb* reality. The *barzakb*, as has been discussed before, is the creative realm which brings all opposites together and which is the source of all creativity and creation. It is only when male and female, light and darkness, existence and non-existence join in the *barzakb* reality that something new comes into being. The active, masculine spirit is as essential as the receptive feminine body for the creation of anything to take place. The body is as essential, holy and good as the spirit, for without it the spirit finds no existence, no manifestation. Qūnawī explains the significance and meaning of “cutting off” the Womb:

The cutting off, concerning which God says that, “He will cut off him who cuts it off”, takes place through belittling the womb, ignoring its position, and disregarding its rights. The person who disregards its rights and belittles it has disregarded God and ignored the specific characteristics of the names that God has deposited within it, names in respect to which it is supported and related to God.²¹⁹

Qūnawī makes it clear that to consider the Womb, which represents the creative feminine principle of life and Nature, “dark” and “opaque” is to belittle it.²²⁰ He believed that this attitude of irreverence towards Nature springs from an ignorance of the true significance of this highly important aspect of life. Nothing can emerge into existence without the Womb. The spirit can find no expression unless it manifests itself through a receptive body. All entities in their receptivity exhibit the feminine principle of the Womb or Nature.

²¹⁸ Qūnawī, *Sharḥ al-ḥadīth*, No. 20. Cf. Murata, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

²¹⁹ Qūnawī, *Sharḥ al-ḥadīth*, No. 20. Cf. Murata, *op. cit.*, p. 221-222.

²²⁰ Qūnawī, *Sharḥ al-ḥadīth*, No. 20. Cf. Murata, *op. cit.*, p. 221-222.

Nature is predominantly feminine and receptive in character and therefore it is “attached to the Throne” in the *hadith* of the Womb. Qūnawī explains that the “Throne” mentioned in the verse “The All-Merciful sat upon the Throne” (Qurān 20:5) represents Universal Nature, the first of the world of material bodies and it envelops and governs everything.²²¹

If anyone “cuts himself” off from the Womb, the world of nature and his own natural configuration, he is cutting himself off from God’s Mercy. But, if anyone joins the Womb, has an attitude of respect and reverence for Nature and learns to live harmoniously with his/her own natural configuration, he/she will join God. Joining God means to become proximate to God and to become a witness of God by being able to discern God through God’s constant and creative self-disclosures. By having a true understanding of how the active, masculine spirit manifests itself in the Womb of nature in a constant process of creativity and new creation, the human being starts to witness God.²²²

The feminine macrocosmic principle that emerges out of God’s “*rahma*” (Mercy) is called the “*rahm*” or Womb.²²³ This Macrocosmic Womb is the macrocosmic world of Nature, which is the reality upon which the witnessing of God depends not only on this earth but also in the next world. God is the Ruler over all levels of reality. He rules the reality of this world of corporeal bodies and forms through His Throne. Therefore, it is impossible to witness Him in this world unless we witness Him within the locus He chooses to manifest Himself.

This locus is the Macrocosmic Womb, the world of Nature within which He chooses to manifest Himself. Therefore, all witnessing of God depends upon a true understanding and due respect accorded to the “Womb”. God is a ruler, even over the level of reality of the next world. Witnessing of God in the next world will also be possible only through remaining joined to the

²²¹ Murata, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

²²² Murata, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

²²³ Murata, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

“womb” and witnessing Him through whatever locus He discloses Himself in.²²⁴

The correct attitude towards God is to be always a Muslim. A Muslim is one who submits to God and who is ever receptive towards God. Therefore, with respect to God Muslims are taught to inculcate their feminine, submissive, receptive characteristic but with respect to becoming the vicegerent of God on earth, they are encouraged to inculcate the masculine active characteristics. Thereby they can become conscious participants of the multidimensional creative process of life.

The true aim of life for human beings according to Islamic spirituality is to become the perfect human being/ *insān al-kāmil*. The full range of *wujūd*'s potential is manifested through the reflection of the divine attributes in the perfect human being. This means that human beings have a function in the cosmos that is far greater than is ordinarily thought. It is a transcendental function, and the actual reason for their creation. The cosmos depends upon the perfect human beings for the actualization of *wujūd*'s myriad attributes in the realm of manifestation. The cosmos was brought into existence so that the full manifestation of God's attributes takes place through the perfect human beings.

As God's representative or deputy, the perfect human being is the substitute for God in creation. The perfect human being displays the characteristic of being a perfect intermediate reality within the greater intermediate reality (*barzakh al-barzakh*) of divine Imagination. Ibn al-ʿArabī writes about this quality of the perfect human being in the following way:

Hence everyone in the cosmos is ignorant of the whole and knows the part, except only the perfect human being. For God *taught him the names, all of them* [Qurān 2:31] and gave him the all-comprehensive words, so his form becomes perfect. The perfect human being brings together the form of the Real and the form of the cosmos. He is a *barzakh* between the Real and the cosmos, a raised up mirror. The Real sees His form in the mirror

²²⁴ Qūnawī, *Sharḥ al-hadīth*, No. 20. Cf. Murata, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

of the human being and the creation also sees its form in him. He who has gained this level has gained a level of perfection more perfect than which nothing is found in possibility.²²⁵

By bringing together “the form of the Real and the form of the cosmos” the perfect human being becomes the perfect “isthmus” linking the feminine realm of the Macrocosmic Womb with the realm of the Universal Spirit. The creativity inherent in the Divine realm is fully actualized in the human form of the perfect human being and the creativity inherent in the human form is fully actualized by a union and subsistence in the Divine realm by the perfect human being. To reach the status of perfect human being/*insān al-kāmil* the creative transformation of the feminine principle of the soul through “joining the Womb” is necessary so that illumination and subsistence in the Spirit can take place. In other words no human being can become perfect unless he/she allows for the creative interaction of both the feminine and masculine principles of existence within their human configuration so that the human soul finds illumination and subsistence in the everlasting spiritual realm. Only and only due to the fact that the perfect human beings are able to reflect these two realities in a perfect manner both at the microcosmic level of existence and at the macrocosmic level of existence, that everything in creation finds existence.

(To be continued in the next issue)

²²⁵*Futūḥāt*, III 397.3. Cf. Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*. p. 249.