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Analysis of the Gendered Dualism of Body and Soul: With Reference to the Views of Selected Muslim Mystics

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Abstract

One of the most fundamental ontological dualisms in the thought of Muslim mystics is the dualism of body and soul, taking a central position among other mystical dualisms. Throughout the history of ideas, this dualism has, from its earliest formulations, assumed symbolic gendered representations. The present study employs an analytical approach to examine this dualism and its gendered construction, demonstrating how it has been symbolically gendered and exploring the relationship that Muslim mystics established between sex and gender. The findings indicate that Muslim mystics either denied the existence of female semen, regarding women merely as the recipient of the male seed, or attributed only a negligible and inferior role to the female contribution in human reproduction. Accordingly, every human being is born with a dual-gendered constitution, possessing two opposing sets of qualities: femininity, inherited from the body or the mother, and masculinity, inherited from the soul or the father. Even in perspectives that assign women a preliminary role as the locus of God's self-disclosure, enabling men to attain gnosis, women nevertheless remain associated with nature and the passive principle. Alongside prevailing cultural assumptions and commonly held beliefs, the experiential knowledge of the mystics also profoundly shaped their views on this matter. However, Abu al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī presents a distinctive position. According to him, women and men contribute equally through their respective reproductive seed. Unlike other mystics, he interprets gender in the Qur'anic verses not as the body-soul dualism, thereby placing women and men on an equal ontological footing.

Keywords: Dualism, Gender, Body, Soul, Muslim Mystics.

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1. Introduction

Dualism is a doctrine that postulates the existence of two fundamental causal principles underlying reality and explains the constituents of the world or the human being through the ontological opposition and axiological distinction between these two principles. Not every binary opposition constitutes a dualistic system; rather, only those dualities that presuppose two foundational causal principles and understand them as the ultimate sources responsible for the coming into being of the world and humanity may properly be regarded as dualistic. According to the religion phenomenology, dualism refers to a conceptual system that explains the existence of the world and the human being on the basis of two fundamental and opposing principles. These principles are not only regarded as the origin of creation but are also understood as the source of the ontological and value-based oppositions manifested within existence. Thus, dualism can properly be discussed only where cosmogenesis or anthropogenesis is at issue—that is, where an account is offered of the principles responsible for the origin of the universe and human beings (Eliade, 2005, Vol. 4, p. 507).

Various forms of dualism have emerged across different intellectual traditions. Among the most prominent in theology and philosophy is the mind–body dualism, which predates the Greek philosophical tradition and was already present in earlier Eastern systems of thought. Owing to the historical dominance of phallogocentrism, this dualism assumed symbolic gendered forms from its earliest manifestations, establishing an association between the soul (or mind) and masculinity, on the one hand, and the body and femininity, on the other. Within this symbolic framework, superiority is attributed to the soul, which not only exercises dominion over the body but is, at times, portrayed as seeking to escape it (Butler, 1999, p. 17) in order to attain knowledge of its divine origin and return to its primordial homeland.

According to this dualistic framework, differences are reduced to a hierarchical binary in which subjectivity and agency occupy one pole, while objectivity and passivity are relegated to the other. This dualistic worldview became the object of sustained criticism by ecofeminist thinkers from the 1970s onward (Mickey, 2018, p. xix), who advocate an anti-dualist perspective. Yet even in philosophical systems that seek to reconcile form and matter or bridge the gap between them, such gendered metaphors have largely remained intact (Lloyd, 1984, pp. 5–12).

Within the Abrahamic religious traditions, women have likewise been understood as being more intrinsically associated with the body and sexuality than men. Consequently, the perceived shamefulness of sexuality has been closely linked to the female body, giving rise to the expectation that women's bodies should remain concealed. In Christianity, the uncompromising repudiation of corporeality and sexuality resulted in women—regarded as their primary embodiment—being portrayed as dangerous and as sources of sin and shame, symbolizing sexual temptation, moral corruption, and evil (Ahmad, 2015, p. 54). A variety of religious and philosophical factors contributed to the formation of this perspective, including the Jewish narrative of women's secondary ontological status, exemplified by the creation of Eve from Adam's left rib and her role in the transgression involving the forbidden tree, as well as the Hellenization of the Mediterranean world and the misogynistic legacy of pre-fourth-century Greek-Aristotelian thought. These religious and intellectual traditions later intersected with pre-Islamic Arab beliefs within the Islamic milieu, although some scholars have also emphasized the influence of Iranian and Zoroastrian conceptions of gender on the development of gendered discourse in Islam (Ahmad, 2015, p. 53).

Among the various domains of Islamic thought, Islamic mysticism (taṣawwuf) constitutes one of the most significant fields for examining questions of gender. This is because it encompasses numerous forms of dualism—including those of soul and body, spirit and flesh, light and darkness, and good and evil—all of which possess both ontological and axiological dimensions and are frequently expressed through symbolic gendered representations. Consequently, Islamic mysticism provides an especially fruitful context for investigating the historical development of gendered thought in Islam. It raises an important question that cannot be overlooked: why, within the history of Sufism and the Islamic spiritual tradition—often characterized as a compassionate or even "feminine" interpretation of Islam—the male nevertheless continues to function as the normative human subject.

The primary objective of the present study is to provide an analytical examination of gender within the body–soul dualism as articulated by selected Muslim mystics. In addition, the study addresses the related issue of sex and human reproduction in order to advance the hypothesis that the gendered construction of the body–soul dualism is grounded in the Sufis' biological understanding of the distinct reproductive roles of women and men. It should be noted that this theme is not reflected throughout the entire corpus of Sufi literature; rather, it is explicitly discussed and developed only by certain Muslim mystics. Accordingly, the author has examined the available mystical sources as comprehensively as possible in order to identify and analyze these discussions.

2. Literature Review

A considerable body of scholarship has examined the relationship between gender and dualistic systems of thought. For example, in *The Man of Reason: Male and Female in Western Philosophy*, Genevieve Lloyd explores how the distinction between masculinity and femininity became embedded as a symbolic structure within the philosophical and Judeo-Christian traditions, shaping and being shaped by philosophical conceptions of reason (Lloyd, 1984). Likewise, Rosemary Radford Ruether, in her article *Dualism and the Nature of Evil in Feminist Theology*, analyzes the construction of good and evil through the mind–body dualism in both the Greek-Christian and feminist traditions, demonstrating how these

frameworks are intertwined with the dualism of male and female. She further explains the interrelationship between ontological, ethical, and gender dualisms in Western intellectual history (Ruether, 1992). Similarly, Daniel Boyarin, in *Paul and the Genealogy of Gender*, closely examines the Pauline epistles in order to identify the cultural mechanisms that contributed to the formation of gendered ontological dualisms (Boyarin, 1993). In addition, Elaine Low, in the edited volume *Sacred Custodians of the Earth? Women, Spirituality and the Environment*, discusses the soul/body dualism, its relationship to gender and nature, and critiques anti-dualist perspectives while comparatively examining the relationship between women and nature across several religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism (Low & Tremayne, 2001). Within the field of Islamic studies, numerous works have also addressed questions of gender. Among the most influential is Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, which not only traces the historical development of gender in Islam but also investigates its intellectual and historical foundations (Ahmed, 2015). Moreover, Arjomandi et al., in their article "A Comparison of Sanā'ī's and Mawlānā's Views on Women," analyze both the positive and negative attitudes of Sanā'ī and Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī toward women (Arjomandi et al., 2020). The present study differs from these earlier works in two important respects. First, it investigates a field that has thus far received little scholarly attention. Rather than examining the general status of women in Islamic mysticism, this study analyzes how the body–soul dualism became gendered within the Sufi intellectual tradition and how this gendered framework shaped the broader worldview of Muslim mystics. Second, the article is structured around the hypothesis that the gendering of the body–soul dualism is rooted in the mystics' biological understanding of the differing reproductive roles of women and men. This hypothesis further suggests that experiential knowledge played a significant role in the formation of religious and mystical knowledge. It is hoped that the present study will provide a meaningful point of departure for further research on gender within the Islamic mystical tradition.

2.1. The Body–Soul Dualism in the Thought of Muslim Mystics

One of the most fundamental ontological dualisms in the thought of Muslim mystics is the body–soul (or soul–self) dualism. Although some mystics regard the soul as an immaterial substance equivalent to the self (*nafs*), others maintain a distinction between the two, while still others adopt an intermediate position by interpreting the difference as one of spiritual rank or degree rather than essential nature (al-Farāhīdī, 2004, Vol. 7, p. 270). The present study does not engage with these doctrinal differences or the various hierarchical conceptions of the soul and the self. Instead, it focuses on the immaterial essence that stands in opposition to matter or to that which is materially conditioned.

Using a symbolic language, Muslim mystics frequently describe the material realm as the World of Dominion (ʿĀlam al-Mulk), the sensible world, or the world of darkness, in contrast to the World of the Kingdom (ʿĀth al-Malakūt), the world of light, or the realm of spirits and intellects. Within this metaphysical framework, the body, being material, is regarded as dense and dark, whereas immaterial realities possess a luminous essence (Ibn ʿArabī, 2003, pp. 106–107). This symbolism draws upon the Qur'anic declaration, "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth" (Qur'an 24/35). Consequently, many Muslim mystics describe God as the Light of Lights (*Nūr al-Anwār*), the primordial source from which all lights originate (al-ʿAjam, 1999, p. 999; al-Ghazālī, 1996, p. 275). The realm of spirits likewise originates from this world of divine light (al-Ghazālī, 2007, Vol. 1, p. 57), while the human soul descends from the world of lights into the bodily form, where it becomes imprisoned (ʿAyn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī, 2014, pp. 148–195).

Many Muslim mystics compare the soul to a bird, the body or the material world to a cage, and the mystical path (*sulūk*) to the bird's flight and liberation from its confinement (al-Ghazālī, 1991, p. 283; ʿAyn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī, 1962, pp. 30, 86). This metaphor also echoes a well-known Prophetic tradition: "The world is the prison of the believer..." (al-Majlisī, 1983, Vol. 74, p. 159). Mystics who adopt this worldview portray the soul as the field of goodness and the treasury of divine mercy, whereas the body is described as the field of evil and the repository of desire (al-Sulamī, 2003, p. 308). At the same time, they regard the human being as a composite of both elements, maintaining that each is indispensable for the attainment of human perfection. As one mystical author explains: "The wisdom behind the human body originating from the lowest of the low (*asfal al-sāfilīn*) while the spirit derives from the highest of the high (*a'lā ʿilliyīn*) is that the human being, in bearing the Trust of divine knowledge (*amānat al-maʿrifah*), must possess the full capacities of both realms. Thus, nothing in either world surpasses the human being in strength to bear this trust. These capacities pertain not to outward form but to essential qualities. Accordingly, the power possessed by the human spirit, originating from the highest realm, is unmatched among all spiritual beings, whether angels, devils, or others. Likewise, the power possessed by the human self, originating from the lowest realm, is unparalleled among all beings of the lower world, including beasts, predators, and every other creature" (Rāzī, 1904, p. 38).

According to ʿAyn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī, the human being possesses satanic attributes in their body and the lower self (*nafs*), while possessing divine (*raḥmānī*) qualities in their spirit and the heart. He further explains that the darkness of the *nafs* arises from its intimacy and attachment to the earthly body: "O dear one, the human being does not possess a single attribute but many. Within every human being there exist two impulses: one divine (*raḥmānī*) and the other satanic (*shayṭānī*). The body and the *nafs* belong to the satanic domain, whereas the spirit and the heart belong to the divine. The first entity to enter the body was the *nafs*. Had the heart preceded it, the *nafs* would never have remained in this world. The body possesses density in relation to the heart, while the *nafs* possesses the quality of darkness. Since the body is fashioned from earth and shares this darkness, the two have developed intimacy and affinity. The dwelling place of the

nafs is the left side, whereas the abode of the heart is the breast. At every moment the nafs is supplied with increased passion and error, while the heart is continually adorned with the light of divine knowledge” (*‘Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānī*, 2014, p. 195; Rāzī, 1904, p. 38). For Muslim mystics, the body–soul dualism plays a pivotal role among all other mystical dualisms. Within this hierarchical vision of reality, the body represents the lowest level of human existence, just as the material world occupies the lowest level of the cosmic order. Matter is considered intrinsically dark because of its density and its remoteness from the primordial source of divine light.

2.2. The Gendering of the Body–Soul Dualism in the Thought of Muslim Mystics

Throughout the history of gendered thought, women have been associated more closely than men with corporeality and the body. This conception prevailed across Mesopotamian, Iranian, Greek, Christian, and Islamic cultures, while processes of cultural exchange further reinforced these symbolic associations (Ahmed, 2015, p. 32). Against this background, an important question arises: Did the intellectual system of Muslim mystics, like other traditional systems of thought, also develop a symbolically sexualized or gendered structure? The following discussion outlines the principal mystical interpretations of gender within the body–soul dualism.

First Perspective: Some Muslim mystics establish a direct correspondence between biological sex and symbolic gender, explaining femininity and masculinity through the dualism of the self (nafs) and the spirit (rūh). According to this view, the existence of Adam and Eve in the material world represents the manifestation, respectively, of the archetypal forms of the spirit and the self in the unseen realm. Eve's creation from Adam symbolizes the emergence of the self from the spirit, while the union of the self and the spirit transfers their respective feminine and masculine characteristics to the earthly forms of Adam and Eve.

According to this interpretation, Adam and Eve constitute earthly replicas of the spirit and the self, and every human being contains within themselves a reflection of both archetypes. Nevertheless, males primarily represent the universal spirit while being combined with the qualities of the self, whereas females primarily represent the universal self while possessing characteristics of the spirit (Kāshānī, 2014, p. 95). Within this framework, the self (nafs) possesses the attribute of femininity, whereas the spirit (rūh) possesses the attribute of masculinity, because the spirit occupies the position of the active principle (fā‘il), while the self assumes the role of the passive principle (munfa‘il). As stated in *Awrad al-Aḥbāb wa Fuṣūṣ al-Ādāb*: “The ‘self’ possesses the attribute of femininity, and the spirit the attribute of masculinity. The spirit occupies the station of the active principle, while the ‘self’ denotes the station of the passive principle; and between them there has existed, from eternity, the abode of mutual love, for between male and female there is a natural inclination and mutual attraction” (Bākhārī, 2004, p. 233).

Consequently, the body, by virtue of its femininity, its belonging to the material world, and the passivity of matter, is likened to a daughter, whereas the world of intellects—or the realm of spirits—characterized by masculinity and activity, is likened to a son. As explained by Āshtiyānī: “It is the orientation of the higher spirits toward the entities manifested in their loci, which become determinate in the imaginal world. By virtue of the imaginal realm and its intermediary nature, these spirits assume its characteristics and become colored by them. The fruit of this mystical union appears at the level of the universal body and the world of sensible bodies. In this process, the spirits occupy the station and rank of masculinity, while nature possesses the degree of femininity; and the intelligibility of the universal body, together with the form of the Throne, acquires the station of the offspring” (Āshtiyānī, 1991, p. 468). Here, the “higher spirits” refer to immaterial realities existing at the highest ontological levels before embodiment. Although they possess neither physical form nor image in their own realm, they become determined within the ‘ā He al-mithāl (the imaginal or intermediary realm between spirit and matter). In descending into lower levels of existence, they become subject to the conditions governing the imaginal realm, thereby relinquishing their former state of absolute transcendence in order to assume determinate forms. From this perspective, the material world emerges through the symbolic “marriage” (tanākūḥ) of spiritual realities with imaginal forms. This cosmological process itself is expressed through a gendered dualism: the spirits take the masculine position as the active, formative, and life-giving principle, whereas nature represents the feminine position as the receptive substrate. Nature—or primordial matter—functions as the vessel that receives the influence of the spirit and acquires form through it. Thus, femininity is consistently identified with receptivity and passivity, while masculinity signifies activity, causation, and form-giving.

Similarly, Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, in the story of “The Arab and His Wife” (*Makhlāṣ-e Mājarā-ye ‘Arab va Juft-e Ū*), presents the woman as a symbol of the self (nafs) and the man as a symbol of the intellect (‘aql), maintaining that both are indispensable for every human being, whether righteous or sinful:

The tale of the man and the woman has been narrated;

Know it as an allegory of your own self and intellect.

This woman and man, who signify the self (nafs) and the intellect (‘aql),

Are both indispensable for the righteous and the wicked alike...

(Mawlānā, 1994, Vol. 1, pp. 2629–2634)

Some Muslim mystics employ this symbolic framework to explain why no prophet was sent in the form of a woman.

As Kāshānī states: “The existence of Adam in the visible world is the manifestation of the form of the spirit in the unseen realm, while the existence of Eve in the visible world is the manifestation of the form of the self (*nafs*) in the unseen. Eve's creation from Adam—‘*and He created from it its mate*’—symbolizes the generation of the self from the spirit. Through the union of the self and the spirit, their respective masculine and feminine attributes were transmitted to the forms of Adam and Eve. Just as all things proceed from the spirit and the self, the descendants deposited within Adam's loins came into existence through the union of Adam and Eve. Thus, Adam and Eve constitute earthly copies of the spirit and the self, and within every human being another copy is reproduced through the union of the individual spirit and the individual self, from which the heart is born. The male descendants of Adam derive their form primarily from the Universal Spirit, although mixed with the qualities of the self, whereas females derive their form primarily from the Universal Self, although mixed with the qualities of the spirit. For this reason, no prophet was ever sent in female form, since prophethood—through its governance over human souls and its efficacy within creation—is associated with masculinity. Moreover, the Spirit is the intermediary through which the prophets are manifested, and the Spirit bestows the form of masculinity. God knows best” (Kāshānī, 2014, p. 96). Najm al-Dīn Rāzī likewise presents a symbolic and dualistic narrative concerning the mystical union of spirit and body. In his account, the marriage between the spirit, symbolizing the male principle, and the body, symbolizing the female principle, gives birth to two children. The first is a male child who approaches his father and represents the heart (*qalb*), while the second is a female child who resembles the mother and represents the self (*nafs*). The first child embodies all praiseworthy qualities, whereas the second inherently possesses the two fundamental attributes of desire (*hawā*) and anger (*ghaḍab*), which constitute the source of all reprehensible moral qualities. These attributes arise from the mother's elemental constitution, rooted in the four natural elements, and Rāzī even regards them as the very substance from which Hell is formed. Yet because the *nafs* is born not only of the body but also of the spirit, it possesses, alongside its lower qualities, the attribute of permanence (*baqāʾ*) and certain praiseworthy characteristics inherited from the father and the spiritual realm (Rāzī, 1904, pp. 29, 92).

Second Perspective: According to another group of Muslim mystics, femininity and masculinity are not essential substances but accidental attributes (a *rāḍ al-dhāt*) through which the underlying essence manifests itself. Drawing upon the opening verse of Sūrat al-Nisāʾ—“O humankind! Be mindful of your Lord, who created you from a single soul and created from it its mate, and from the two spread many men and women” (Qurʾan 4/1)—they conclude that men and women are identical in their essential nature. Within this interpretation, man was created in the image of God, while woman was created in the image of man. Consequently, with respect to essence (*jawhar*), woman is fundamentally identical to man because she originated from him; yet with respect to determination (*taʾayyun*), the two remain distinct. Just as every being naturally longs for its own essence, man is drawn toward woman. Conversely, because woman constitutes a part derived from the whole, she likewise longs for man, for every part is naturally attracted to the whole from which it originates and to which it ultimately belongs (Ibn ʿArabī, 1985, Vol. 3, p. 127; Khwārazmī, 2000, p. 1070).

In this perspective—one that was developed most systematically by Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240 CE)—women are fully capable of attaining spiritual perfection because they share the same essential reality as men. Nevertheless, owing to the woman's ontological posteriority in creation and her derivation from the man's rib, women are regarded as ontologically deficient with respect to creation itself. For this reason, woman is considered unable to attain the same rank as man, and men are consequently regarded as superior to women (Qurʾan 2/228) (Ibn ʿArabī, 1999, Vol. 1, p. 124; Vol. 10, p. 348). This relationship is likened to that between heaven and earth, where the heavens occupy a higher ontological station while the earth remains at the lowest level of existence (*asfal al-sāfilīn*). Woman thus functions, in relation to man, in the same manner as nature functions in relation to the active principle: she is the locus of receptivity and passivity. It is precisely because of this ontological posteriority that women are designated *nisāʾ* (Ibn ʿArabī, 1999, pp. 419–420). Nevertheless, Ibn ʿArabī also emphasizes, on two grounds, the primacy of women as the locus of divine self-disclosure through which men attain knowledge of God. First, because woman is a part of man, a person's knowledge of himself necessarily precedes his knowledge of his Lord. Second, since God is never contemplated apart from material manifestation and all mystical witnessing (*shuhūd*) occurs through material forms, the contemplation of God through women represents the most complete and perfect form of divine witnessing (Ibn ʿArabī, 1999, pp. 411, 419).

Third Perspective: A third group of Muslim mystics does not posit a direct correspondence between biological sex and symbolic gender. Rather, spiritual perfection is understood as requiring the abandonment of those characteristics identified with femininity, while masculinity functions as a symbolic representation of virtue and spiritual excellence. Accordingly, women are considered capable of attaining the highest stages of the mystical path only insofar as they acquire masculine spiritual qualities. For this reason, when ʿAbd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī refers to female Sufis, he addresses them with the masculine Arabic title *ustādh* (“master”), thereby indicating that these women had attained a level of spiritual excellence traditionally associated with male Sufis (al-Sulamī, 2003, p. 245). Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār similarly describes the spiritual station of Rābīʿa al-ʿAdawīyya by declaring: “When a woman becomes a man on the path to God, she can no longer be called a woman” (ʿAṭṭār, 1983, p. 59). Likewise, it is related from ʿAbbāsa al-Ṭūsiyya that, on the Day of Resurrection, when the divine call “O men (*yā rijāl*)” is proclaimed, the first person to step forward among the ranks of the “men” will be Mary (Maryam) (*ibid.*).

Some mystics attribute this distinction between masculine and feminine qualities to the dual manifestation of the

Divine Attributes, some of which are luminous while others are dark. The former correspond to God's attribute of guidance, whereas the latter correspond to His attribute of leading astray, a distinction also reflected in *the Qur'an* (Qur'an 13/27). Drawing upon Qur'an 92/3 ("By He who created the male and the female"), 'Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānī argues that possessing feminine qualities signifies susceptibility to Satan's domination—an expression of the Divine attribute of leading astray—whereas possessing masculine qualities signifies the ability to overcome Satan, reflecting the Divine attribute of guidance. Nevertheless, every human being embodies a mixture of both masculine and feminine qualities. As he states: "These are attributes of the soul, not of the body. Whoever is subjugated by Satan possesses feminine qualities; whoever is able to place Satan beneath his feet deserves the name of man. ... Whoever becomes the bride of Satan possesses feminine qualities, and the title of man is never bestowed upon him in the heavenly realm. Rābi'a possessed masculine qualities, whereas Abū Jahl was less than a woman" ('Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānī, 1983, Vol. 2, pp. 230–232).

According to this perspective, reprehensible qualities give rise to sensual desire and the pursuit of worldly pleasures, which are regarded as signs of feminine disposition and spiritual indolence (Badakhshī, 1995, p. 113). These lower impulses belong to the domain of the nafs and stand in opposition to the masculine virtues of firmness, dignity, and spiritual strength, being instead associated with femininity and effeminacy (khunūtha) (Kāshānī, 2014, p. 484; al-Ghazālī, 2007, Vol. 3, p. 344). Here, khunūtha refers not to biological ambiguity but to men who outwardly possess a male form while inwardly exhibiting what are perceived as feminine characteristics.

Within this framework, an inseparable connection exists between women and desire. This association is traced back to Eve's creation from Adam. When Adam beheld Eve's beauty, he perceived within it a reflection of the Divine Beauty, for "every beauty derives from the beauty of God." Yet when desire—described as the most complete of animal qualities and the greatest veil separating humanity from God—overcame him, his intimacy with God diminished, and his soul became attached to sensual pleasures. It was then that Satan succeeded in deceiving him during the divine trial (Rāzī, 1904, p. 52). Consequently, desire is regarded as Satan's most powerful instrument for leading humanity astray, while women are portrayed as constituting half of the forces of evil, an unfailing arrow in Satan's hand. Marriage is therefore considered permissible for the spiritual seeker only when no other means exists to restrain sexual desire (al-Ghazālī, 2007, Vol. 3, p. 209). Within this perspective, loving women is often viewed negatively, and marriage becomes a mechanism through which one seeks refuge in a woman from the dangers symbolically associated with woman herself.

By contrast, another group of mystics, particularly those associated with the School of Divine Beauty (maktab-i jamāl-parastī), regard human love as the necessary prelude to divine love and strongly emphasize its spiritual value. As 'Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānī writes: "Alas, if you do not possess love for the Creator, then at least cultivate love for the creature" ('Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānī, 2014, p. 366). Such love liberates the individual from self-centeredness and serves as a preparation for the love of God (Baqlī Shīrāzī, 1987, pp. 11, 28). Nevertheless, even among these mystics, the beloved is more often a beautiful male witness (shāhid) than a woman.

Taken together, all three perspectives portray woman as a subordinate sex, since she is considered intrinsically more closely associated than man with corporeality and sexuality. The resulting distrust of the bodily dimension leads to the representation of woman as the primary symbol of sensual desire and the reprehensible qualities of the nafs—qualities that constitute both the source of evil and a veil preventing true knowledge of God. This conception has a long intellectual history, extending at least as far back as the Pythagoreans, who understood the cosmos as an interplay of opposing binaries—good and evil, superior and inferior—within which the masculine occupied the higher position because masculinity was associated with form, activity, and determination, whereas femininity was linked to matter, passivity, and indeterminacy (Lloyd, 1984, pp. 3, 104). This understanding was subsequently developed by the Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, who likened the authority of men over women to that of the soul over the body or the mind over the passions (Seibert, 1974, p. 19). It was later appropriated by the Abrahamic religious traditions and became deeply embedded in the thought of many Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious thinkers.

2.3. The Role of Sex in Reproduction According to Muslim Mystics

The respective roles of women and men in human reproduction remained a central topic in embryological thought for many centuries. This debate continued until the eighteenth century, when scientific discoveries established that both sperm and the ovum contribute equally to the formation of the embryo. The present section examines the views of selected Muslim mystics concerning the reproductive roles of the two sexes under two broad categories, in order to demonstrate how empirical knowledge influenced their religious and mystical understanding.

The First Category: The majority of early Muslim mystics maintained that only the male seed plays an active role in the generation of human beings, whereas the woman's womb merely serves as the place in which that seed is deposited and developed, without itself making a direct contribution to procreation. According to this view, before the creation of humanity, God brought forth the progeny (the particles of human seed) of Adam's descendants from Adam's loins and took from them a primordial covenant, an event traditionally identified with the Qur'anic Covenant of Alast (Qur'an 7/172). These seeds were subsequently transmitted through the loins of men and planted in the fertile ground of women's wombs (Faiz Kashani, 1996, Vol. 3, p. 51; al-Tirmidhī, 1993, p. 15). The analogy most frequently employed is that of agriculture. Just as a field is prepared for cultivation and receives the seed sown by the farmer, so the male seed emerges

through the urinary passage from between the loins (*ṣulb*) and the breastbone (*tarā'ib*) (*Qur'an* 86/6–7) and is deposited within the woman's womb (*al-Ghazālī*, 2007, Vol. 3, p. 812; *al-Ghazālī*, 1996, p. 575). This interpretation is supported by the so-called Verse of Cultivation (*āyat al-ḥarth*): “Your wives are a tilth for you; therefore approach your tilth whenever you wish” (*Qur'an* 2/223). Here, the term *ḥarth* denotes land prepared for cultivation and the sowing of seed, while the expression *fa' tū* is interpreted not merely as sexual intercourse but as the act of giving, specifically the giving of the man's seed to the woman's womb (*Abbās-Nezhād*, 2006, p. 104). In this regard, Rumi states that an army of beings (God's creatures) proceeds from the loins of men toward the wombs of mothers so that the seed of life may grow within the maternal womb (*Zamani*, 2019, Vol. 1, p. 894):

An army marches from the loins toward the mothers,
So that vegetation may grow within the womb.
Another army journeys from the wombs toward the earthly realm,
So that the world may be filled with male and female alike.

(*Al-Ghazālī*, 1991, pp. 3086–3087)

He further writes:

The heavens are the male, and the earth the female in wisdom;
Whatever the former casts down, the latter nurtures.

(*Al-Ghazālī*, 1991, p. 440)

Some mystics even describe the creation of the universe itself as a form of reproduction, maintaining that God sent water down from His Throne upon the earth and thereby made it fertile, just as semen proceeds from a man and fertilizes a woman (*Ibn 'Ajlba*, 1998, Vol. 4, p. 224).

Rūmī likewise states:

The heavens say to the earth, “Welcome!”
“I am drawn to you as iron is drawn to a magnet.”
The heavens are the male, and the earth the female in wisdom;
Whatever the former casts down, the latter nurtures.

(*Mawlānā*, 1994, Vol. 3, pp. 3305–3306)

Ibn 'Arabī similarly employs the expressions “the higher fathers” (*al-ābā' al-'ulwiyyah*) and “the lower mothers” (*al-ummahāt al-sufliyyah*), arguing that every active cause is metaphorically a father, whereas every receptive entity is metaphorically a mother. Accordingly, all spirits function as fathers, while nature functions as the mother, and from their mystical union a new reality comes into being. As an illustration, Ibn 'Arabī explains that, in the spiritual order, God first created the Pen (*al-Qalam*, identified with the First Intellect), from which He brought forth the Preserved Tablet (*al-Lawḥ al-Maḥfūz*) to serve as the locus upon which the Supreme Pen inscribes divine decrees. This process mirrors physical reproduction, in which the man's seminal fluid enters the woman's womb. Within this symbolic framework, the man corresponds to form, whereas the woman corresponds to prime matter (*hayūlā*) or cosmic dust (*habā'*) (*Ibn 'Arabī*, 1985, Vol. 2, p. 656; Vol. 1, pp. 138–139). As Ibn 'Arabī further explains, “Since marriage in this world exists for the preservation of the human species, Eve was created living, rational, and female so that she might become the field of cultivation and the place in which generation occurs” (*Ibn 'Arabī*, 1985, Vol. 2, p. 249). Within this perspective, the heavens, the spirit, and form symbolize the masculine principle as the role of the active agent, whereas the earth, nature, and matter symbolize the feminine principle as the receptive and passive substrate. Just as the earth becomes fertile through the rain descending from heaven, so the woman conceives through the seminal fluid that proceeds from the man's loins.

The Second Category: A small number of early Muslim mystics, together with many later Sufi thinkers, maintained that both sexes possess reproductive seed, understanding human generation as the result of the union of two seminal fluids. Unlike the first group, they interpreted the term *tarā'ib* (“breastbones” or “chest”) in the Qur'anic verse “He was created from a gushing fluid, issuing from between the loins and the breastbones” (*Qur'an* 86/6–7) as referring to the woman. Accordingly, the “gushing fluid” denotes the semen of both the man and the woman, which unite within the womb to produce a single entity referred to in the singular as *nutfah* (*Ḥasanzādah Āmulī*, 1999, p. 665).

Among the mystics who adopted this position, Najm al-Dīn Rāzī presents the most elaborate explanation. According to his account, Adam's self (*nafs*) was first brought into existence through the union of the spirit and the body. Within Adam's *nafs*, however, were already contained the subtle particles of the selves of all his descendants, just as the particles of their bodily existence were embedded within Adam's earthly form. When God brought forth Adam's progeny from his loins, each particle of earthly substance was accompanied by a corresponding particle of the self. The spirits then assembled, and every spirit became attached to the particle with which it possessed an intrinsic affinity. Thereafter, the particles returned to Adam's loins while the spirits returned to the Divine Presence. God then divided these particles into two equal portions: one was placed within the mother's reproductive fluid, from which the body would originate, and the other within the father's seed, from which the *nafs* would arise. When these two elements united within the womb, the spirit that had previously been connected to that particle in the spiritual realm became attached to the developing embryo (*mudḡah*) (*Rāzī*, 1904, p. 92).

More generally, this group of mystics assigned distinct but complementary functions to the reproductive contributions

of men and women. For example, some maintained that flesh and blood originate from the woman's seed, whereas bones and nerves derive from the man's seed (Maybudī, 1992, Vol. 10, p. 310; Vol. 8, p. 155; Ṣaḥī 'Alī Shāh, 1999, p. 222). Likewise, the primordial progeny of Adam were believed to reside within the man's semen, which, upon entering the womb, mingles with the woman's reproductive fluid—sometimes identified symbolically with the body—just as seed is scattered into cultivated soil (Ḥasanzādah Āmulī, 2002, Vol. 2, p. 61). This understanding closely resembles the embryological theory of Galen, who, in contrast to Aristotle, maintained that women also possess semen. According to Galen, the white tissues of the body, such as tendons and veins, derive from the man's seed, whereas the woman's seed gives rise to the red tissues, including flesh and blood (Galen, 1992, pp. 48, 241). This distinction appears to have been influenced by the visible color and texture of these bodily structures, one being more readily associated with the whiteness of male semen and the other with menstrual blood (see Darovskikh, 2017, pp. 95–116). Within this perspective, one of the two reproductive seeds functions as the active principle, while the other serves as the receptive principle. The womb is identified with nature, and some authors even describe it as the true meaning of nature itself. Human reproduction is thus understood as analogous to the creation of the cosmos through the mystical union of the Universal Intellect, symbolized as the father, and the Universal Soul, symbolized as the mother. On this basis, men are considered superior to women (Ḥasanzādah Āmulī, 1999, p. 647). As Ṣaḥī 'Alī Shāh expresses it:

Men stand as guardians over women, Just as intellect stands over the soul.

Not in one respect alone, but in every respect, Especially in intellect, faith, and steadfastness.

The Exalted Truth, in perfect justice, Has granted superiority to some over others.

Thus, the Creator of the world bestowed upon men Superiority over women in every respect.

(Ṣaḥī 'Alī Shāh, 1999, p. 144)

An important exception exists within this tradition. Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 1074 CE) appears to be the only Muslim mystic to have maintained that the reproductive seed of both women and men consists of the same fundamental components, which together give rise to both the internal and external organs of the human body (al-Qushayrī, 1981, Vol. 3, p. 715; 2009, p. 545). Unlike most of his fellow mystics, al-Qushayrī regarded men's superiority over women as consisting solely in their greater physical strength. He further argued that this greater physical capacity merely explains why heavier responsibilities are assigned to men; what truly matters before God is the heart and spiritual aspiration (himmah), not bodily strength. Significantly, nowhere in his Qur'anic commentary, Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt, does he portray women as occupying an inferior ontological or spiritual status (al-Qushayrī, 2009, Vol. 2, p. 618; 1981, Vol. 1, p. 330). By contrast, some contemporary Muslim mystics, such as Ḥasanzādah Āmulī (d. 2021), drawing upon ḥadīth literature, philosophy, Sufi metaphysics, and especially the Avicennan medical and philosophical tradition, argue that the woman's contribution to reproduction is merely that of a preparatory cause ('illah mu'iddah). According to this interpretation, the woman does not directly participate in the creation of the human being; rather, her role is to prepare the material substrate so that it may receive the formative influence of the active agent—that is, the man—and to prepare the embryo within the womb to receive its form from the giver of form (Ḥasanzādah Āmulī, 2002, Vol. 4, p. 100). This position parallels that of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā), who accepted the contribution of both reproductive seeds but maintained that the spirit originates from the man's seed, whereas the body originates from the woman's seed (Ibn Sīnā, 1984, p. 402).

Overall, both perspectives portray the mother as corresponding symbolically to the body, while the father represents the spirit. This symbolism reflects the ancient motif of the Earth Mother and the Heavenly Father, a theme that appears widely in the mythological traditions of many civilizations following the advent of agriculture. According to Mircea Eliade, early human beings appear not to have recognized the causal relationship between sexual intercourse and pregnancy, owing in part to the temporal gap separating conception from childbirth. It was only through the domestication and breeding of animals that this connection gradually became apparent. With the emergence of agricultural societies, the male came to be understood as the fertilizing agent, giving rise to symbolic correspondences between woman and cultivated land, the phallus and the plough, and human reproduction and agriculture. Consequently, across numerous religious and cultural traditions, woman became symbolically identified¹ with the earth (Eliade, 1993, pp. 249–250). Within this symbolic framework, the woman is understood merely as the provider of the material substance of the embryo—that is, the body—whereas the man is regarded as the one who imparts the spirit. Following its endorsement by Aristotle, this conception came to be accepted as scientific fact throughout many cultures and civilizations. Reinforced by the theological traditions of the Abrahamic religions, it was subsequently incorporated into Sufi thought. Significantly, despite the advances of modern embryology, which have demonstrated the equal

¹ For example, in one Sumerian creation myth, heaven and earth were originally conceived as a single cosmic mountain, whose base was the earth and whose summit was the sky. The sky was personified as the male deity An, while the earth was embodied as the female deity Ki. From their union was born the air god Enlil, who subsequently separated heaven from earth, thereby bringing the ordered cosmos into existence (Hooke, 2020, p. 24). Likewise, in one ancient Egyptian creation myth, the union of the male deity Geb and the female deity Nut gave rise to other gods, including Osiris and Isis (Näs, 2007, p. 53). Similarly, in ancient Greek mythology, Zeus functions as the heavenly father whose unions with various female deities result in the birth of successive generations of gods (Näs, 2007, p. 80).

biological contribution of women and men to human reproduction, many contemporary Sufi thinkers continue to uphold this traditional understanding.

3. Conclusion

The present study has demonstrated how the body–soul (or self–spirit) dualism within the Islamic mystical tradition became gendered, profoundly shaping the intellectual framework of many Muslim mystics. Within this worldview, whatever is more closely associated with the body is understood as dark, deficient, and the source of evil. On this basis, a comprehensive dualistic system emerges in which all oppositions are ultimately subsumed under the symbolic opposition between the feminine and the masculine. Thus, woman, femininity, the body, the self (nafs), darkness, and evil are grouped on one side, while man, masculinity, the spirit, the intellect, light, and goodness occupy the opposite pole. In this way, the gendered body–soul dualism becomes one of the organizing principles of the Sufi worldview. According to one group of mystics, gender—understood as masculinity and femininity—constitutes the defining set of qualities that make one symbolically male or female. Adam represents the archetype of the Universal Spirit, embodying noble spiritual qualities associated with masculinity, whereas Eve represents the Universal Self (nafs), embodying the lower qualities associated with femininity. Every human being is therefore regarded as a composite of the attributes inherited from the primordial father and the primordial mother, although men are considered to participate more fully than women in the qualities of the Universal Spirit. By contrast, another group maintains that although gender is related to biological sex, it is not determined exclusively by it. In this interpretation, whereas sex refers to the subject itself, gender is defined primarily through action and moral disposition. Consequently, attaining human perfection requires abandoning those characteristics identified as feminine. Despite their doctrinal differences, however, both perspectives ultimately place women in a subordinate position, portraying them as the second sex and as the principal symbol of reprehensible qualities, especially sensual desire and evil. Even within the comparatively positive perspective that regards women as the primary locus of God's self-disclosure through which men attain knowledge of the Divine, women continue to function symbolically as nature and as the receptive principle, thereby remaining ontologically subordinate.

This raises an important question: Why did the body–soul dualism become so thoroughly gendered in the thought of Muslim mystics? The present study argues that, alongside cultural exchange, prevailing social beliefs, philosophical traditions, and religious influences, the empirical knowledge available to the mystics themselves significantly shaped their understanding. The classification of mystical viewpoints presented here demonstrates that most mystics either denied the existence of female reproductive seed altogether, regarding women merely as recipients of the male seed, or assigned only a minor and subordinate reproductive function to women. As a consequence, they conceived the human being as possessing a dual constitution characterized by two opposing sets of qualities: femininity, inherited from the body or the mother, and masculinity, inherited from the spirit or the father.

An important exception to this pattern is the position of Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, whose interpretation illustrates how a different understanding of human reproduction could produce a fundamentally different theological outcome. Because al-Qushayrī maintained that women and men contribute equally through their respective reproductive seed, he interpreted the Qur'anic text in a manner that does not gender the body–soul dualism, thereby placing women and men on equal ontological footing. This exception suggests an important conclusion. Just as the Sufis unanimously maintain that the human being is a microcosm of the universe, the mystic's worldview is ultimately determined by his understanding of the human being. As this study has shown, even some contemporary Sufi thinkers who continue to rely upon traditional biology and Avicennan medicine preserve a gendered conception of the body–soul dualism precisely because they continue to accept premodern assumptions regarding the respective reproductive roles of women and men. Consequently, their cosmology and anthropology remain grounded in a gendered metaphysical framework whose underlying biological assumptions are no longer supported by modern embryology.

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