Prophetic Subjects of Love: Prophetic Education in the Field of Affections & Emotions Re-Understanding a Prophetic Narration
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In the Field of Affections & Emotions
Re-Understanding a Prophetic Narration - Abbas Ali Shameli & Shahnaz Yousofi

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“Prophet Muhammad (PUH) said: “From your world three things are made lovable and attractive to me: Women, fragrance but my most pleasure is made in prayer”

Al-Ghazali And His Version Of The Prophet’s Saying

This maxim is recorded by Abu Hamid al–Al-Ghazali (450–505/1057–1111) in his interesting discussion in Kitaab al–Mahabbah (The book of Love). Al–Ghazali’s main concern is to explain the real nature of love and its various types and stages along with its process of formation in order to highlight the final stage of love which is devoted to Allah (swt). Defining love (mahabbah) as something which incorporates both perception and pleasure (la ma’na li al–hubb illa al–mail ila ma fi idrakihi ladhdhah, there is no meaning for love except a tendency to conceive something which brings pleasure (Al–
Ghazali, *Ihya*, p. 254), he argues that one may divide perception and pleasure based on his/her different senses. Each sense deals with a specific type of sensibilia and of course a particular type of pleasure.

Accordingly, he quotes the above mentioned narration (hadith) as a proof example of his argument. He accordingly asserts that in the Prophet’s word, each of the three terms: women (*nisaa’*), perfume (*tiib*) and prayer (*salah*) are associated with one or more of the senses. A perfume is desired only because we perceive its aroma through smelling and not through seeing and hearing. Women, on the other hand, are beloved since we enjoy them through touch and seeing and talking. It follows that other senses such as smelling, tasting and hearing are not intermediary in our enjoyment of women.

Prayer is considered the most desirable act as perceived through our heart and our mind. He therefore points out that according to this maxim we must have an inner sense as well as external senses to help us enjoy the inner meanings of the divine truths as they pertain to Allah.

Although it is reasonable in a sense to divide perception (or more precisely sensation) and pleasure based on the difference of senses, one may argue that it is hard to use the Prophet’s saying as an example of this doctrine. Women, for instance, are not lovable just because we enjoy being with them and having pleasure with them only through touching and seeing. In the Prophet’s saying it is mentioned that three items are made lovable to him. If one wants to understand the real reason of this part of the Prophet’s word, he should refer to the Qur’an and other prophetic sayings.

It is important to know and to realize that besides the physical and physiological aspects, women are considered as the main source of psychological needs particularly in the family unit. According to the Qur’an, it is revealed that women and wives are the main sources of calm and relaxation. In one of Imam Ali al-Rida’s (a.s.) sayings, it is recorded that women are the very source of relaxation as sleep at night is so. The release of tensions and being relaxed are not rooted only in touching and seeing. It is a psychological need which is met through the wholly controlled interrelationships between wives and husbands. In another verse, which is particularly addressed to the Prophet’s wives, it is mentioned that they should not make their word soft to excite a person to feel an eager desire for them.

It shows that through hearing also, we may take benefit from women. In addition, Imam Ali Ibn Abi Talib says that women are like flowers, so they must not be used in hard jobs or put under pressure. Even though Imam said that they are like flowers not to be misused in hard jobs, one may come to the conclusion that they are like the flowers which should be smelled. Then we may enjoy them through smelling.

Based on his mystical approach, Ibn Al-Arabi states that perfume “*al-tib*” is put after the term women “*al-nisa*” since in them there are existential odors. As it is famous in an Arabic example: “The best scent is (what is on the) the beloved’s neck.”
When we try to understand the Prophet’s word, we may have different approaches, either literal, theological, traditional, mystical or even socio and psychological. In this paper, I will compare the different versions of the hadith as it is narrated in Shi’i and Sunni sources. Then I will have a theological approach based on the verbal differences. Finally, by a quick look on Ibn Al–Arabi’s mystical interpretation of this hadith in the last chapter of his Kitab al–Fusus, I will put an end to my paper.

**Verbal Differences**

Before discussing verbal differences of the Prophet’s saying, we have to consider the importance of the utilization of the passive form of “hubbiba”. It implies that the Prophet regarded his favorite tendencies toward all three mentioned cases as something which is bestowed to him by Allah. Thus it was Allah who created us with a system of desires and hates. This idea is not only mentioned in the Qur’an but also explicitly appears in other versions of the hadith which will be discussed later in this paper. One of the literal differences in the hadith is the term dunya/this world.

Although Al–Ghazali delivered this hadith as it contains the term al–dynya9, the original sources which he quotes from are different. In both Shi’i and Sunni sources there are three versions concerning this term. Sometimes it appears as including “min al–dynya9 some as “min dunyaakum”10 and occasionally none of them.11 The problem appears if we take into account the term dunya in its two forms as (dunyaakum, or al–dynya). One may argue that despite of the first two cases, namely, perfume and women which are worldly affairs, prayer surely cannot be considered as so. Then how they all are put together in one context as worldly issues?!

There are two possibilities to answer this question. One is to take that version of hadith which lacks the term dunya9. The other is Suyouti’s suggestion according to which there is an alternative meaning for the word “min”. He asserts that according to Tustari in Sharh al–Arba`in “min” in this hadith means ‘fi’. So, all cases will be considered as religious affairs “min al–din” even though they are in the world ‘fi al–dynya9”.12 Interestingly we should note that “min dunyaakum” implies that the Prophet essentially did not have any tendency toward worldly affairs. This was because he was completely devoted to Allah. However as a role model he behaved in a way that his followers took him as a perfect model and behaved in a moderate and balanced way.’13

Comparing the content of this Prophet’s saying with what is revealed in the Qur’an14, we realize that only women and sons are the provision of the life of this world. This comparison is, of course, reasonable if we accept that the Prophet in his saying is referring to himself as a role model and, then, those characteristics can be found in every human being. Surprisingly, in another verse15 both women and sons are regarded to be the most pleasurable “qurrat ain” exactly as the Prophet regarded the prayer subject of his most pleasure. This is achieved if we behave based on piety (taqwa).

The other verbal difference is the existence or non–existence of the term “thalath/three”. With the exception of Al–Ghazali (Ihyaa K. al–Mahabbah, 255), Fayd (al–Mahajjah, vol. 3, 68), Majlisi in one of his
quotations *(Bihaar al-Anwar vol. 73, 141)* none of the other Shi`i or Sunni sources offered the Prophet’s saying with the term “thalath”\textsuperscript{16}. However, the problem is like when the *hadith* contains the term *dunya*. Consequently, all three cases are put in one category with no difference. This argument can be responded to in one of the following ways:

1. that either most of the versions which are quoted by traditionists, “*muhaddithun*” do not incorporate the term “thalath”;

2. if “*min*” as suggested by Suyouti means ‘*fi*”, then there will not be any problem even if we put all three cases in one category;

3. “*Salat* is always distinguished by the Prophet with the term “*qurrat `aini*” (my utmost pleasure) and sometimes is conjuncted with a new verb as “*ju`ila or ju`ilat*”;  

4. In other versions of the *hadith* sometimes only women (*nisaa* and perfume (*tiib*) are put together\textsuperscript{17} but the prayer (*salaat*) is quoted separately\textsuperscript{18}. However, if they are all put together, they are verbally distinguished.\textsuperscript{19}

Another literal argument is about the order of the two terms “*al–nisaa*, *al–tiib*”. As well as Al–Ghazali (*Ihya’, k. al-Mahabbah*, book. 36, 255)., we see only Fayd (*al–Mahajjah*, vol. 3, 68) and al–Mutqi (*Kanz at– ‘Ummaal* vol. 6, 673) who quote the *hadith* as beginning with “*at–tiib* “. All other sources give the priority to the term “*al–nisaa*”. I do not believe that this verbal order makes any difference in the meaning of the *hadith* or create a priority in the lovability of the two. However, all Sunni and Shi`i original sources give the verbal priority to the term *nisaa*. The last phrase of the Prophet’s saying is: **but my most pleasure is made in prayer**\textsuperscript{20}

Although we are not sure whether this phrase is distinguished by a separate verb or not;\textsuperscript{21} there is a big difference between “*hubbiba*” and “*qurrat aini*”. Being in a manner by which or in consequence of which the eye becomes refreshed or becomes at a deep rest and tranquility (*al–qarar, al–hudu*)\textsuperscript{22} shows that while praying, one is at the apex of meeting his/her hopes and his/her desires. So, the best kind of pleasure is acquired through performing prayer. Accordingly, even if we take pleasure in women and perfume which puts us in a manner of relaxation, our final and most pleasurable tranquility will be achieved in prayer. It was thus that the Prophet said: “the prayer is made so loveable to me as water to a thirsty and food to a hungry. Yet the difference is that they will soon be satisfied by means of drinking and eating but I never become exhausted by praying.”\textsuperscript{23}

**Ibn Al–Arabi’s Mystical Interpretation**

Quoting the Prophet’s saying in the last chapter of his *Fusus al–Hikam*, Ibn Arabi takes an interesting mystical approach. While he considers the *hadith* as a unique bezel which is issued from Prophet Muhammad\textsuperscript{24}. Ibn Al–Arabi puts his emphasis on the word “*hubbiba*”. He comes up with the idea that
the Prophet started his saying with love, because love is the very core of all of creation. God created man in His form, then He loved him. He also created women from men in their form. So, men existentially tend to love women because they are in fact a part of men’s existence, and women tend to love men like the one who likes her hometown and her originality. Therefore, the Prophet loves women since he observes the true reality in them.

In addition, he combines love with his feminist theory upon which he offers a new explanation for the manifestation of man in the course of creation. According to Ibn Al–Arabi, the harmony of the items in the Prophet’s saying resembles what actually occurs in the existence. “Al–tiib” as a masculine term is located between “al–nisaa (a real feminine term) and “al–salaat” (a metaphorical feminine term) such as the location of Adam between the divine essence (al–dhaat al–mawjoud `anha/ again a metaphorical feminine) which is the very source of his creation and Eve (a real feminine) who is manifested from Adam. Therefore, in both cases there is a masculine which is surrounded by feminines.

Ibn Al–Arabi then explains that preceding women and postponing prayer in the hadith is because the manifestation of women’s entity is a part of men existence. Men observe the reflection of their existence in women. In addition, according to the Prophet, self–knowledge always precedes knowing God. So, whenever man wants to know his Lord, he must previously know himself. Knowing himself partly depends on knowing women since they are indeed the manifestation of his existence.

Trying to interpret the last phrase of the Prophet’s saying, he argues that prayer is “qurrat al– `ayn” since it is seeing and observing (mushahadah wa ru’yah). So, the utmost pleasure of prayer is for the inner eye. The prayer is the remembrance (dhikr) of God and he who remember the true reality, puts himself in one session with God Eventually if one has inner sight, he/she undoubtedly observes he/she who sits beside him. If one could not acquire the stage of seeing, he/she would not reach the ultimate reality of the prayer and of course will not have “qurrat `ayn” because he/she did not see whom he/she was talking to. “Qurrat `ayn” is nothing other than observing the beloved. When a lover sees his/her beloved, his/her eyes will be completely satisfied and expects nothing else. This is why the prayer is considered as something by which or in consequence of which the eye becomes cool, refreshed or at complete rest.

**Comments**

Comparing Al–Ghazali’s approach with that of Ibn Al–Arabi, we realize that the Prophet’s saying, like the Qur’an, includes various aspects and can be approached and studied based on different perspectives. However, Al–Ghazali’s approach had its own limitations that were cited and discussed in this paper. Although both Al–Ghazali and Fayd Kaashaani quoted this Prophetic hadith from Nassaa’i and Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, one can see some differences in the verbal aspect of it which may change our understanding and the meaning of Hadith.

Combining the love of women and perfume with the prayer, the Prophet gave a moderate model upon which both worldly and divine affairs have been taken into proper consideration. Thus, the extreme
attitudes and actions in relation to those three subjects in its both sides are exited from Prophetic tradition. It means that neither withdrawing from women and perfume as examples of worldly affairs and dealing only with the prayer nor siding with the divine issues and being isolated from beauties and attractions of this world is the prophetic tradition. Prophet’s lovable things included a range of worldly and divine subjects in a balanced way. However, by utilizing two different terms, one for women and perfume, “hubbiba”, on the one hand, and one for the prayer “qurrat ʿayn”, on the other hand, the Prophet indicated his attention to divide his love on all aspects properly.31 Like the fact that is indicated in this hadith that only the prayer is the subject of qurrat ʿayn, women and offspring also based on a Qur’anic idea can be the subject of “qurrat ʿayn” if they are loved in the way of piety and perfection.

Another socially important point in the Prophet’s saying is his consideration that perfume is one of the lovable things besides women and prayer. Not only in words but a significant practical characteristic of the Prophet was his heavy use of perfume. He used to spend much more money to buy perfume than to buy food!32 Not only for prayer, but also when he wanted to visit the people or appear in a public place, he tried to be nicely perfumed and have an attractive smell. Immediately after each ablution (wudu) he used to use perfume. So, when he went out of his house, people noticed that it was his smell.

As I have discussed in this paper, the only way of understanding the Prophetic traditions (ahaadith nabawiyyah) is to refer to the Qur’an and his other interpreting sayings. Using this method, Ibn Al–Arabi tried to have a mystical understanding of this hadith. His discussion is concentrated on the central theme of the Prophet’s saying namely, love. In Islam and for the Prophet love stays as a central theme when we turn to Allah or we want to approach people in society.

Selected Sources


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2. “... and among his signs is this , that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquility with them and he has put love and mercy between your (heart)...”(30:21)


“He it is that hath made you the night that ye may rest therein”(10:67).

“... and among his signs is this , that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquility with them and he has put love and mercy between your (heart)...”(30:21)

4. According to the Qur’an, the Prophet’s wives are commanded: “ be not too complaisant of speech, lest one in whose heart is a disease should be moved with desire.”(33:32) Although the verse is addressed to the Prophet’s wives, one may assert that the content may found in any men–women relationship since there is not any particularity in the case that is mentioned in the verse. Accordingly, women’s voice (even if they are not singing) might be a source of pleasure for men.

5. “A woman is a sweet basil not a housekeeper. See al–Hurr al–Amili, Wasa’il al–Shi’ah, vol. 14,
Ibn Al-Arabi, Fusus al-Hikam, 220. 


13. It is quoted from Imam ‘Ali Ibn Abi Talib that once, a group of the prophet’s companions restrained from having sexual intercourse with their wives, to sleep at night and eat during the day. When Umm al-Salamah (the Prophet’s wife) informed the prophet, he immediately went to them and said: “Do you leave women?! I go toward women, I eat during the day, and I sleep at night. Who put away my tradition, is not from me (my follower).” Based on this narration, the Prophet’s behavior can be considered as a perfect model to prevent extremities. See Tabatabaa’i, Sunan al-Nabi, 147.

14. The love of desires, of women and sons is made to seem fair to people; that is the provision of the life of this world...(3:14)

15. O Lord! grant us in our wives and our offspring the joy of our life, and make us guides to pious people. (Q. 25:74)


17. – Muttaqi, Kanz al-Ummaal, vol. 6, 673, al-Hurr al-Amili, Wasaail al-Shi’ah, vol. 7, 10. Quotes from Kulayni, Furu’ al-Kafi vol. 2, 2. What is quoted from Imam ‘Ali Ibn Abi Talib that once, a group of the prophet’s companions restrained from having sexual intercourse with their wives, to sleep at night and eat during the day. It is noted that the Prophet immediately went to them and said: “Do you leave women?! I go toward women, I eat during the day, and I sleep at night. He who put away my tradition, is not from me (my follower).” Based on this narration, the Prophet’s behavior can be considered as a perfect model to prevent extremities. See Tabatabaa’i, Sunan al-Nabi, 147.

18. – Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, Musnad, vol. 1, 245, 255, 296:

19. This is like what is narrated by Kulayni in his K. al-Kafi, vol. 5, 320 and Furu’ al-Kafi, vol. 2, 2 as:

20. This is like what is narrated by Kulayni in his K. al-Kafi, vol. 5, 320 and Furu’ al-Kafi, vol. 2, 2 as:


24. 141. What is quoted from Imam ‘Ali Ibn Abi Talib that once, a group of the prophet’s companions restrained from having sexual intercourse with their wives, to sleep at night and eat during the day. It is noted that the Prophet immediately went to them and said: “Do you leave women?! I go toward women, I eat during the day, and I sleep at night. He who put away my tradition, is not from me (my follower).” Based on this narration, the Prophet’s behavior can be considered as a perfect model to prevent extremities. See Tabatabaa’i, Sunan al-Nabi, 147.

25. Ibn Al-Arabi, Fusus al-Hikam, fass 27, 214. He may also refer to hadith al-qudsi which says: “YOU and has made it seemly in your hearts, and he has made hateful to you disbelief and transgression and disobedience. (49:7)
It is narrated that A’ishah (the Prophet’s wife) said:

"I was sent for a woman, a woman of a man, and when I came, she showed me the picture of her, and her picture made me love her, and her love made me love her." It shows that although the Prophet loved his wives, his deep love was devoted to talking with God. See Tabataba’i, Sunan al-Nabi 251. He quotes from al-Shahid al-thaani Asraar al-Salaat, 18, 23 & Majlisi, Bihaar al-Anwaar, vol. 84, 257.