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Abstract

"The Language of 'Sign and Signification' from the Perspective of Sufi Experience: From al-Niffari> to Ibn 'Arabi>"

The present study concerns itself with the relationship between the devotional experience of the Muslim mystic or Sufi, which is both religious and epistemological in nature, and the forms through which this experience is conveyed. The conclusion offered by the study is that the form of expression is dependent upon the depth and type of the experience being conveyed, and the creative and expressive capacities of the devotee.

The study devotes attention to the Muslim mystic's vision of what has been termed sign (*al-h{arf}*), signification (*al-mah{ru>f}*), and word (*al-kalimah*)—and parallels to which we find in reason (*al-'aql*) and the reasonable (*al-ma'qu>l*), perception (*al-h{iss}*) and that which is perceived (*al-mah{su>s}*)—whose semantic fields encompass all existent entities other than the Divine Truth, be they language, essences, or any other created being. The study concludes that the vision to which one arrives through the experience of mystical devotion is marked by two opposing aspects, since, insofar as sign, signification, and word are means of thought, reflection, knowledge, recognition, clarification, expression and communication, they are transformed, from the Sufi perspective, into thick veils and barriers, or an incomprehensible language in relation to the knowledge that is revealed through the devotional experience of the mystic. The reason for this is that such knowledge consists of divine manifestations which are inaccessible through human reason and perception alone. This is what al-Niffari> refers to as "the language of the sublime" (*lughat al-'izz*) which, when it is "spoken" by the Divine Truth, effaces all other knowledge and language.

However, although both al-Niffari> and Ibn 'Arabi> conceive of the word as a veil that serves to conceal its Creator, it nevertheless possesses a significance and sacredness of its own in its capacity as a passageway to the entity to which it refers. After all, existence is nothing but the words of the Divine Truth. Those who read these words with the guidance provided by the light of the truth to which mystic devotional experience leads will see the Divine Truth manifested through them, and will be able to distinguish truth from falsehood based on a knowledge derived from personal experience and certainty, whereas those who read them without the benefit of this light will fail to interpret correctly the images before them, and will remain without sight or understanding.

Key words: Sufi literature, interpretation of Sufi discourse, semiotic analysis.

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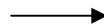
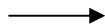
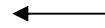
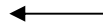
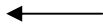
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