

## New Commentaries on Ibn Al-Arabi's *Fusus al-Hikam*: A Comparative Study

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### ABSTRACT

One of the key concepts of Sufism as localized or indigenized Islamic wisdom in Asia is compassion (*rahma*). The school of the Oneness of Being (*Wahdat al-Wujud*) provides valuable examples for this concepts, esp., in the commentaries on the treatise of *Fusus al-Hikam* by Ibn al-'Arabi. In particular, the chapter on the prophet Zakariyya demonstrate the reflection on the concept of mercy in the school of the Oneness of Being. The indigenization of this Sufi tradition is based on these commentaries that has been of utmost importance for the school of the Oneness of Being. The article analyzed some of these commentaries in the light of this localization process. Commentaries that emerged in and around the Indian Ocean, e.g., Al-Qāshānī, Jāmī, and Iḥābādī, were selected. They can be considered part of the local wisdom in the Asiatic realms. The current article found the idea of indigenization of key concepts of Islamic spirituality in Muslim communities, particularly through Ibn 'Arabi's work.

**Keywords:** *Wahdat al-wujud*; *Fusus al-Hikam*; *rahma*; commentaries; indigenization

### Introduction

Evidently, Ibn Arabi's concept of global spirituality can be aligned with and applied to local spirituality. Two of the most significant examples of spirituality value are *wahdat al-wujud* and *rahma*. Numerous research attempts have been made to unfold a web of knowledge beyond the usual focus on base texts of the field of the history of Islamic ideas – be it Islamic law, theology, doctrine, Sufism, etc. One of the major Islamic schools of thought and practice of post-classical and post-avicennian (al-Rahim, 2018; Benevich, 2019; Benevich, 2017; Lohlker 2021) times of ideas is *wahdat al-wujūd* (Dagli 2016) or oneness of being (oneness' is preferred to the usual translation, unity, since the latter implies the multiplicity of phenomena, however, the original idea of *wahda* is one *primal* being) traced back to Muḥyī al-dīn Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240 CE) (Addas 1993). One of Ibn Arabi's most important texts is called *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam* (Ibn al-'Arabī, 1943) the *Bezels of Wisdom* (Abrahamov 2015), inspiring many commentaries. These commentaries contributed to the indigenization (Lohlker, 2021a; Kooria, 2022) and localization (Geertz, 1983) of Ibn Arabi's knowledge in Iran, South Asia, and beyond.

Recent studies on the intellectual history of the Islamic world have reconfigured the hallowed focus on foundational works of theological, juridical, sufic, historical, and other schools to a more all-encompassing view including the processes of reception, adaptation, and indigenization of the Islamic legacy in diverse contexts. Matthew B. Ingalls stated that Western studies of Islamic intellectual history witnessed a move away from the stances of twentieth century CE

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and discovered the treasure trove of creativity enshrined within the thousands of Muslim commentary works across all disciplines – as far as we know – and many of them still awaiting critical editions (Ingalls 2016: 119).

In his seminal work on the Shafi'ite scholar and Sufi Zakariyyā al-Anṣārī (d. 1520 CE), Ingalls (2021) distinguishes between several types of commentarial practice (Kooria, 2022). He noticed a textual trend in post-classical (being aware that Ingalls prefers “middle period” to “post-classical” as a chronological term we still could argue for post-classical or post-avicennian not implying a period of decline but indicating a simple temporal sequence) Islamic times saying that the commentarial tradition “was written into the DNA of Islamic tradition” (Ingalls 2021: 8) bridging the gap between the base texts and the actual understanding.

Bridging the gap between base texts and indigenized practice by producing new texts, which is a kind of ‘textualization’ of Islamic intellectual activity, to follow the argument of Konrad Hirschler (Ingalls 2021: 8), was part of the commentarial culture of the post-classical culture. Ingalls provides a good example for the rationale of writing commentaries: The Ottoman scholar Ḥajjī Khalīfa (d. 1657 CE), also known as Kātin Jelebī (Manran, 1988), provided the following justifications for writing commentaries: 1) when the original text is too concise to be understood by readers without the aid of a commentary; 2) when the rationale behind the original text is omitted by the author and the readers will need necessary background knowledge to fully understand it; and 3) when misunderstanding may occur due to the author’s use of allegorical or metaphorical language that requires some clarification to grasp the intended meaning. These three justifications well – although Ḥajjī Khalīfa wrote in the early modern period – reflect the attitude of earlier commentators. (Ingalls 2021: 11).

The first type of texts being part of the commentarial process is the *sharḥ*, usually translated as ‘commentary’. It denotes a more or less complete explication of the base text (*matn*) – “a relative term that theoretically indicates any text that is being commented on even if it be a commentary text itself” (Ingalls 2021: 13). The commentary may carry other terms beyond the mere *sharḥ*. The next type of texts is the supercommentary, in Arabic *ḥāshiyā*. Supercommentaries may evolve into supersupercommentaries up to fifth-order commentaries (Ingalls 2021: 14).

*Ḥāshiyā* is etymologically connected to the word for the margins of a page and thus suggests marginalia, but in its technical sense, it came to denote something more thorough than marginalia by the very end of the Islamic middle period. Particularly in the subdisciplines of Islamic law, *ḥāshiyās* would proliferate during the Ottoman period, reaching their apex around the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The author of a *ḥāshiyā* would have taken a preexisting commentary as the base text, though whenever the word *matn* is used expressly in the text, it is more likely than not referring to the original base text that the previous commentator has built upon (i.e., the text that is two generations removed). Of course, a future commentator may subsequently do *sharḥ* to an existing *ḥāshiyā* to generate a supersupercommentary, which is often, though not exclusively, referred to as *taqārīr* (sing. *taqrīr*; literally “determination” or “settling”). Owing to the lack of a fixed nomenclature for each generation of texts that Muslim commentators generated through this process of *sharḥ*, Robert Wisnovsky has proposed a system whereby we refer to the latter text as a third-order commentary, a *ḥāshiyā* as a second-order commentary, and so on (Ingalls 2021: 14).

A parallel line of textual production is the *mukhtaṣar*, translated as ‘abridgement’ that should not be understood as a mere condensation but also as an ‘amplification of meaning’ (Ingalls, 2021:16). The *mukhtaṣar* engenders a specific tradition of commentaries. The educational process of the teaching circle, in Arabic *ḥalaqa*, produces another type of texts. For these texts Ingalls refers to Islamic law. These texts are called – a fact well-known – *ta’līq*, or note taking. The *ta’līqs* are not mere lecture notes but, in more sophisticated cases, are expanding notebooks that encompass a host of questions that the compiler had researched and all materials from relevant sources appended to various questions discussed (Ingalls, 2021:23).

These *ta'liqs* may lead to a kind of proto commentaries emerging ultimately as new commentaries starting a new stage of the commentarial process. Due to the lack of space and time, we will focus on first-order commentaries (*sharḥ*), bearing in mind that all these other textual genres are still possibly available and should be discussed for a more complex study on the dynamics of Islamic knowledge and traditions. We will have to look, however, into the commentaries itself! To begin with, a reflection on the prophet mentioned in the chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ* will introduce the issues discussed. Unlike prior studies, the current research is aimed at elaborating the differences and similarities in commentaries made by al-Qashani, Jami', and Ilaḥabadi on Ibn al-Arabi's *Fusus al-Hikam*.

## Methods

This study employed the document or text study method in qualitative research (Bowen, 2009). The research data have been divided into primary and secondary data. The preliminary research data were obtained from the Book of *Fusus al-Hikam* by Ibn 'Arabi, while the secondary data from authoritative, up-to-date, and relevant literature sources related to the object of discussion (Martins, 2018). The secondary data consist of comments on the concepts of *rahma* and *wahdatul balik* from Ibn 'Arabi delivered by Al-Qāshānī, Jāmī, and Ilāḥābādī. The data were then categorized thematically and structured based on the information obtained. The categorization was structured to answer the proposed research question. Data collected from primary and secondary literature sources were then analyzed comparatively. Referring to Denzin-Lincoln (2005), a comparative analysis is used to find similarities and differences in comments from Al-Qāshānī, Jāmī, and Ilāḥābādī regarding the object of study.

We will focus on the story of Zakariyyā, which can be found in Ibn al-Arabi's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. The Qur'anic story of Zakariyyā is found mainly in 3, Ali-'Imrān, 35-41 and 19, Maryam, 1-16. We will not follow the story in detail but focus on the view of Ibn al-'Arabi. Following Nettle and his excellent summary this view may be summarized as follows: "The Qur'anic story of Zakariyyā is [...] a tale of God's power and mercy. His mercy being the main expression of His power. As the second verse of *sūra* Maryam, introducing Zakariyyā, says: 'This is an account of your Lord's mercy to his servant, Zakariyyā.' This Qur'anic theme of God's mercy is Ibn [al-]'Arabi's foundation in his own discussion of God's power and mercy. It is also his own discussion which for him reveals the true meaning of the Qur'anic story.

The chapter on Zakariyyā in the *Fuṣūṣ* is titled 'The Wisdom of Divine Sovereignty (*ḥikma mālikiyya*) in the Word of Zakariyyā.' The *ḥikma mālikiyya* on the title refers to God's absolute power and dominion over all beings, while within the body of the chapter, the theme of God's mercy is the main focus, appearing prominently as the universal metaphysical manifestation and agent of His dominion. These are the essential features of the Qur'anic Zakariyyā in Ibn [al-]'Arabi's view, set out for elaboration and transformation in his particular understanding of the subject. In developing his interpretation, Ibn [al-]'Arabi organized his discussion according to three themes: 1) the metaphysics of God's mercy; 2) the ethical implications of metaphysical mercy; and 3) names and attributes, divine and otherwise, in the expression and manifestation of God's mercy (Nettler, 2003:155-156).

This understanding of the *Fuṣūṣ* can be supplemented by a comment on another verse of the Qur'an. *The Study Quran*, a new translation edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, comments on surah 21, *al-Anbiyā'*, 107: "Mercy renders *rahmah*, a word that also can mean 'compassion', 'kindness', 'love', and 'caring'. [...] The grammar verse allows it to be understood to mean either that the sending of the Prophet Muhammad was a merciful act by God or that the Prophet was himself a mercy that God sent. It can signify that the Prophet Muhammad is a possessor of mercy, is merciful, or is himself a mercy (Nasr, 2015:828-829). Comparing these findings with our analysis on the commentaries to the *Fusus*, we shall then be able to follow the diversity of lines of thought in the school of Ibn al-'Arabi.

## Commentaries of Al-Qāshānī

'Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī or al-Kāshānī (d. between 1329 and 1335 CE) was one of the most important Sufi authors of the Persianate world (Amanat and Ashraf 2019) and a transmission point of the school of Ibn al-'Arabī to the wider Persian-speaking world. His influence was so strong "that much of the subsequent discussion of Ibn [al-]'Arabī's thought and doctrine whether in the Eastern Islamic world or in the modern West can best be understood as in fact a reference to Kāshānī's writings" (Morris, 1987:101). Among his most important writings is a Qur'anic commentary with the title *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, roughly translated as 'Esoteric meanings of the Quran', sometimes falsely ascribed to Ibn al-'Arabī (Morris, 1987:101). Other important works are his handbook of Sufi terminology (al-Qāshānī, 1991), *iṣṭilāḥāt al-sūfīya*, and his commentary on *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (Lory 2009).

This commentary is described by Tilman Nagel as follows: "Al-Qāshānī is convinced that the content of the *Fuṣūṣ* may be summarized in three lines of thought: Ibn al-'Arabī explains in this commentary the nature of the divine being One (*al-aḥadiyya*); he demonstrates the meaning of the names of God and the created things; he analyzes the effects of the works (*al-sha'n*) of God [...] Ibn al-'Arabī understood in the interpretation of al-Qāshānī Islam as an ontology comprising both God and His creation" (Nagel, 2002:473). We cannot not pursue the ontological aspect and will turn to the chapter on Zakariyyā in the commentary of al-Qāshānī. At first he quoted the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*: "The word (*kalima*) of Zakariyyā is characterized by the wisdom of divine sovereignty (*ḥikma mālikiyya*) because the predominant element concerning its state (*ḥāl*) is the determination (*ḥukm*: the diverse usage of the root *ḥ – k – m*) of the [divine] name 'the Owner' (*al-mālik*); the possessor/king (*malik*) is the powerful (*shadīd*). God gave him the attribute of power (*shidda*) and supported him with His power (*quwwa*)" (al-Qāshānī, 2017:338).

He continued: "Know that the mercy of God (*raḥma*) extends to all things (Referring to Sura 7, *al-A'rāf*, 155) – as to their being (*wujūd*) and their determination (*ḥukm*). [Know] that the being of wrath is a result of the mercy of God because the wrath [is coming from God]. His mercy precedes, however, His wrath, i.e., the relation (*nisba*) of mercy to Him precedes the relation of wrath to Him" (al-Qāshānī, 2017:338). Commenting on this passage al-Qāshānī said: "Because mercy is an essence due to the magnanimity because of its essence as an overflowing emanation of grace [pouring out] from the treasure house of mercy. Grace and Being (*wujūd*) are the first emanation (*faiḍ*) of the universal mercy (*ar-raḥma al-'amma*) extending to all things. Wrath, however, is not part of the essence of the absolute true (*ḥaqq*). It is just a negative determination (*ḥukm 'adamī*) that is a result of the non-existence ('*adam*) of the capability to accept things that emerge due to the all-encompassing scope (*kamāl*) of traces of being (*wujūd*) and their determinations (*aḥkām*) in it. Necessarily, the inability to accept ('*adam qābilīya*) the mercy [of God] the non-existence of the appearance of the determination of mercy in this word and the hereafter" (al-Qāshānī, 2017:338-339).

The solution to the problem that God is merciful and full of wrath at the same time is enshrined in the relation of being/existence and non-existence. This relationship was formulated following Ibn al-'Arabī: "Somethings exist or do not exist. Something that exists is *not* non-existent and something that does not exist cannot be existent" (Akti, 2016:130). The wrath [of God] is because it does not exist not part of the mercy of God – implicitly it may exist relationally as the inability to realize His mercy. His ontological considerations justify the assessment of a metaphysical-philosophical commentary representing one strand of the Akbarian commentarial tradition.

## Commentaries of Jāmi

'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmi (d. 1492) was a towering figure in the Persianate world as a poet and as a Sufi author (d'Hubert/Pappas, 2018). His works have been translated into many Asian languages from West to East Asia (Daftari, 1999:462) and Southeast Asia. He wrote two commentaries on the

*Fuṣūṣ*: “Jāmī’s work represents the fullest summation of the long history integrating Ibn ‘Arabī’s Sufi theosophy with the Persian literary tradition” (Feuillebois-Pierunek, 2018:343). Many of Jāmī’s works are dedicated to explaining about Ibn ‘Arabī. His commentary *naqd al-nuṣūṣ fī sharḥ naqsh al-fuṣūṣ* was written in Arabic and Persian and draws on previous commentators. His other commentary following very closely the ideas elaborated in the *Fuṣūṣ* is entitled *Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*.

Due to our focus on the first-order commentarial literature, we will discuss the *Naqd al-nuṣūṣ* as a continuation of the commentarial tradition of the school of Ibn al-‘Arabī. Comparing it to al-Qāshānī’s commentary, which Jāmī referred to at the beginning of the passage we discuss, we will discern some differences to be read as a process of localization. “Know that the secret of describing his [=Zakariyyā] wisdom (*ḥikma*) as divine sovereignty (*al-ḥikma al-ḥākimiyya*) is that the predominant element concerning its states (*aḥwāl*) that it is the determination (*ḥukm*) of the [divine] name ‘the Owner’ (*al-mālik*) because property (*milk*) means power (*shidda*) and the possessor/king (*malik*) is powerful (*shadīd*). [Know] that God has the absolutely strong power (*quwwa*). [...] You should know that intention (*himma*) is one of the inner causes; the inner causes are more powerful in their determining power than the opposing outer causes and do have more reasons to be related to the absolute Truth (*ḥaqq*). Because of this, people who are knowledgeable of Gods decisions (*amr*) are more powerful than the people [who are knowledgeable] of the created world and of greater influence” (Jāmī s. d.:162).

Having stated in an excellent command of Arabic rhetoric the relation of his commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ*, Jāmī turned to a distinction between inner and outer causes declaring the outer causes more powerful. Thus, he is putting the relation of mercy and wrath on another footing as al-Qāshānī had done. To reach the same conclusion that mercy is directly a quality of God, he turned to the narrative of Zakariyyā and the giving of a son as an act of mercy. We have to criticize the assumption that this commentary is to be distinguished from the other commentary, as claimed by Feuillebois-Pierunek (cf. above), since Jāmī used the same argumentative strategies here. His less philosophical and much more narrative approach allows for the widespread reception we mentioned in the beginning of these paragraphs.

### Commentaries of Ilāhābādī

The Chishti-Sābirī interpreter of the thoughts of Ibn al-‘Arabī, Muḥibb Allāh Ilāhābādī (d. 1648 CE), usually called “a South Asian heir to Ibn [al-]‘Arabī” (Lipton, 2009b:4), is well known for his argumentative style inspired by philosophical discussions (Nair 2013). His thoughts may be read as a fusion between post-Avicennian and post-Akbarian thoughts (Lipton, 2009a; Lipton, 2010; Lohlker, 2021). Ilāhābādī “studied the standard rational (*‘aqlī*) and transmitted (*naqlī*) disciplines” (Nair, 2017:891). He was “the most outstanding defender of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own teachings in the subcontinent” (Chittick, 1992:233) it is habitually said. He was well versed in the *Fuṣūṣ* and the *Futūḥāt* writing an important commentary on the first one. “He placed great stress upon the cognitive and intellectual dimension of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings, clearly in reaction to the tendency among certain Sufis to claim that all understanding must derive from ‘states’ and ‘tasting’ (*dhawq*)” (Chittick, 1992:233) However, his uniqueness relies on a different approach (cf. below).

Thus, we may understand Ilāhābādī as a well-indigenized South Asian Sufi, i.e., calling him a *South Asian* heir is justified. But the stress upon “the cognitive and intellectual dimensions” marks the uniqueness of Ilāhābādī. As Nair remarks: “Although modern scholarship has habitually referred to Muḥibb Allāh as an ardent defender of the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* [...] associated with the figure of Ibn al-‘Arabī, such general formulations fail to do justice to the uniqueness of Muḥibb Allāh’s intellectual contributions. Most authors who set out to provide a philosophical defense of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings [...] had tended to prioritize a philosophically utilizable

formulation of *wujūd* or 'existence'. Muḥibb Allāh, in notable contrast, favors a presentation of the divine reality in terms of 'pure essence/quiddity' (*dhāt/māhiyya maḥḍa*), at times going to considerable lengths to uphold his alternative formulation. Such a strategy of argumentation is uncommon among philosophical defenders of Ibn al-'Arabī" (Nair, 2021:108).

A closer look on the commentary of Ilāhābādī on the *Fuṣūṣ* will show the difference of the approach made by this author. Since there is a lack of Ilāhābādī's edited texts, we will have to refer to a manuscript of the commentary. In the discussed passage, we read about the relation of mercy and the wrath of God. Ilāhābādī continued: "Know, that the mercy (*raḥmat*) of God reaches out to everything being the determination of the existence (*wujūd*) of it. The wrath [of God] pertains to the mercy of God. Then again, His mercy precedes His wrath, i.e., mercy's relation to Him precedes the relation of wrath to Him. Know in truth, that the mercy of God – almighty He is – is all-encompassing and all-embracing of everything as to its existence and destination; the existence of everything emanates from the mercy of God and its destination also emanates from the mercy of God. Thus, the existence of Abū Lahab (Rubin, 1979) pertains to the mercy [of God] and his destination to be punished pertains to the mercy [of God].

Know also, that the existence of the wrath [of God] (*ghaḍab*) pertains to the mercy of God due to the inner object (*'ayn*) (Mahmoodi, 2011; Meyer, 1981) of the wrath. If it did not become existent how could the existence of anything without the support of the mercy of the All-Merciful (*raḥmānī*) be possible? If the wrath [of God] pertains to the mercy [of God] then everything resulting from the wrath also pertains to the mercy. Then the vengeance of the revenger is part of the essence of mercy and his reward. Thus, the mercy of the All-True (*ḥaqq*) precedes His wrath, i.e., it precedes the relation (*nesbat*) of mercy to the All-True – He is almighty – precedes the relation of the wrath to Him since mercy and its relation to the All-True – almightiness is He – is the cause (*'ellat*) of the existence of the wrath and its relation to the All-True – He is almighty. But since mercy is the necessary precondition (*moqtaḍā*) of the essence of the All-True contrary to wrath as it is in the case of our messenger for whom his mercy is the necessary precondition of his essence. Because every inner object (*'ayn*) has an existence (*wujūd*) it demands from God, because of this His mercy (*raḥma*) comprises every inner object (*'ayn*).

Ilāhābādī referred to a more philosophical terminology ((Nair 2017, 891).) in his commentary where he wrote in a poem: "The mercy (*raḥma*) in all created things (*akwān*) is in force (*sāriyya*)/ as it is in every essence (*dhāt*) and inner object (*a'yān*) going on (*jāriyya*), i.e., the mercy of God – almighty He is– in all created (*akwān*) and existing things (*mawjūdāt*) is in force and pervades [everything] and is in the essences and inner objects going on because no essence and no inner object will be immutable (*thubūt*) without mercy" (Sirhindī, 1624 CE). As demonstrated by this discussion of Ilāhābādī's commentary, he used a method of argumentation that introduces the aspect of visible thing (*'ayn*) or pure essence (*dhāt*) – and similar notions – to analyze the difficult characteristics of God's mercy putting at the stage of a relational dependence that is much more philosophical than expected from research literature. In general, these ideas mark a unique position in the school of Oneness of Being inspired by the debates in South Asian Muslims (Nair, 2017:891).

## Conclusion

As suggested in this article, even a small sample allows for a preliminary hypothesis that the 'school' of Ibn al-'Arabī is much more diverse than typically assumed. This research found the similarities and differences in opinions made by three commentators, namely al-Qashani, Jami', and Ilahabadi, on Ibn al-Arabi's *Fusus al-Hikam*. The similarity is that all three used spiritual basis and local traditional practice in commenting Ibn Arabi's *Fusus al-Hikam*. Meanwhile, the differences are shown in the use of dissimilar terminologies, argumentation, and narration. We noticed differences in terminologies and methods of argumentation from metaphysical-

philosophical to narrative commentaries, adoption to local debates with other local forms of wisdom. The commentarial traditions this preliminary survey suggests may serve as a source for a better understanding of the Akbarian tradition and the processes of indigenization taking place in a tradition highly imbued with the personal experience of Sufis since the life of the eponym Ibn al-'Arabī. The textual debate – on the other hand – is part of the post-Avicennian ideas circulating in the Islamic world.

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