

Ibn Sahl Al-Isrā'īlī Al-Ishbīlī: Man Loves Man, Platonic Love and Şūfī Masking

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How to cite this paper: Assadi, J., & Na'amneh, M. (2023). Ibn Sahl Al-Isrā'īlī Al-Ishbīlī: Man Loves Man, Platonic Love and Şūfī Masking. *Advances in Literary Study*, 11, 35-53.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/als.2023.111004>

Received: December 4, 2022

Accepted: January 17, 2023

Published: January 20, 2023

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Abstract

Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī, or as he is called in Hebrew, “Abraham ibn Sahl,” is a unique literary phenomenon, who, based on the mysterious literary situation that surrounded him, made many critics unable to judge him! As a result, he did not receive the due attention from the crowds of researchers! Therefore, our study is distinctive as it seeks to present and explain this literary situation in such a way that has never been addressed before. He is an Andalusian poet and thinker who lived in the capital of the Andalusian state in the initial phases of its establishment, and coped with the problem of his Jewish origin and conversion to Islam. Unlike the Jewish-Arab poets in Andalusia who wrote in Hebrew-Arabic (Arabic in Hebrew) as was the common norm, Ibn Sahl wrote in Arabic. This rather complex situation in addition to the double standards in the character of Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī made his poetry appear vague. Ibn Sahl, thus, resorted to different techniques to veil his true self. He, for example, used religious and historical masks, and his poetry was generally full of motifs, symbols and mystery. In other words, he employed dozens of symbols and masks in his poetry, among which the mask of “Moses” emerged. The study examined this mask from a variety of aspects. It regards this mask as a Jewish symbol through which the poet instilled his constant nostalgia for his original religion, i.e. Judaism. It also considers the possibility that Moses may be a symbol of tolerant heavenly religions, especially since his character presents subjects with which the Qur'an and the Torah intersect. In addition, this study looks into Moses as a character that is likely to represent a realistic terrestrial lover. And the fourth course of this study embraces the interpretation that Moses may be a Şūfī earthly mask intended to spread nostalgia for the greatest adoration, i.e. “God”, in the way of Muḥyi Eddīn ibn al-Arabī as displayed in his *Turjumān Al Ashwāq*.

Keywords

Ishāq Ibrāhīm Ibn Sahl Al-Isrā'īli, Muḥyi Eddīn Ibn Al-Arabī, Ṣūfi Mask, Andalusian Poetry, Andalusian Jewish Poetry

1. Introduction

This study points out that despite the simplicity of his father, some of members of this family were very active in the spheres of literature and culture. Although Ibrāhīm ibn Sahl was born as Jewish, he nonetheless was passionately fond of Arabic and managed to memorize the whole Qur'an, many Islamic major sources, the rules of Arabic grammar, and fifteen different meters of Arabic at an early age. Later on, Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īli was educated by many famous Arab scholars and sculptors.

The theme of the courtship, wooing or love characterized the poetry of Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īli, to the extent that his critics focused their notes on the subject of love only, thus making him hostage to this subject and of course to his Jewishness. Obviously, Ibn Sahl has built a great deal of his poetry which denotes the theme of Ṣūfi love on the grounds of poems popular in Arab-Islamic culture. The theme of mysticism which he expressed in an implied manner was a "simulation" and a "recreation" of trendy literature in his time. It may also be understood through the verses of Ibn Sahl that there is a Ṣūfi lover, who coalesces all types of love and regards all Abrahamic (*Ḥanīfi*) faiths on an equal footing. Its attainment occurs by heart and love. The poet's heart and love are a path, as he says, to reach the Lord of the two *Ḥanīfi* or Abrahamic religions in which he believes: Judaism and Islam.

2. Ibn Sahl's Early Life

Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īli al-Ishbīli is regarded one of the prominent Jewish poets who was a pioneer in writing in Arabic. His ancestors and fellow writers and poets, however, used to write in Arabic-Hebrew, or as what some have termed Jewish Arabic. His Jewish father seemed to have been a simple person to the extent that Ibrāhīm was named after his grandfather, Sahl, rather than after his father. Some citations referred to his father as "Abu Al'aysh" (father of living) without indicating his proper name. As his biography indicates, he was born in Seville in Andalusia. Thus, he is Ibn Sahl Abu Al'aysh al-Isrā'īli al-Ishbīli.

All in all, his family was known in Spain, despite the simplicity of his father and the absence of his name from references. The reason, as reviewers monitored, lies in the fact that some family members were very active in the spheres of literature and culture. Unlike Ibrāhīm, Yusuf ibn Sahl and Suleiman ibn Sahl, also poets, preferred to reside in the Christian part of Spain. According to some researchers, their choice was related to religious dictates imposed on them (Tobi, 2006: p. 319).

Although Ibrāhīm ibn Sahl was born as Jewish, he nonetheless was passionately fond of Arabic. Owing to his Jewish roots, he was not allowed to participate in Muslim prayers and to visit scientific workshops held in mosques. It was reported that he used to wait outside these workshops and at mosque terraces to hear from afar what was given. In view of that, he managed to memorize the whole Qur'an in addition to many Islamic major sources, the rules of Arabic grammar, and fifteen different meters of Arabic poetry known as *'Arūd* or *boḥūr* collected and explained by al-Farāhīdī (Al-Ishbīlī, 1998: p. 2).

As for the process of his education, Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī was educated by many famous Arab scholars and sculptors. He, for example, was tutored by the famous Arab grammarian Abū 'Alī al-Shlubīnī and Abu al-Ḥassan al-Bāghdadī. His starting position was marked by writing *Al-Muwashshah* (*muwašṣah*) a literally type of literature combining both an Arabic poetic form and a secular musical genre in addition to classical Arabic poetry at an early age. He contacted a group of famous Andalusian poets such as Abu al-Ḥassan bin Said, who accompanied his journey in Andalusia (ibid. 2).

Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī is known to have approached the theme of "love," in his poetry where he courted a character called "Moses" (Mūsā). Critics have differed concerning Ibn Sahl's dealing with this character. Some critics regard it a male figure influenced by the love of men love men inspired by the same type of love practiced by Abū Nuwās, the famous classical Arab poet. However, this assumption is weakened when the lover turns into a "winery" instead of Mūsā. Other critics see it as a typical male figure with total absented details (Al-Arees, 2005: p. 183). The latter approach offers another direction of interpretation assuming that Mūsā or the typical masculine lover may be one symbol of *al-jowāniyya*¹ (the interiority), adopted by Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī, as we will illustrate later.

Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī wrote a huge number of poems in Arabic, yet many of his works and writings were lost. What was left was collected by scholars in his book, *Dīwān ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī* (Schirmann, 1960: p. 22). Most reference books of the time affirm unanimously that Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī converted to Islam and, consequently, he gained a prestigious status and was surrounded by an aura of fame in the Andalusian literary sphere. Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī became a court poet in the palaces of the rulers for a short time. After the fall of Seville, he moved to live in the kingdom of Ibn Khalās where he continued to write poetry. He remained there until he eventually drowned at sea in one of his travels when he was 40 years old (Al-Zayyāt, 1990: p. 306). These references documented his short life as being pregnant with luxury, pleasures, and well-being in the palaces of rulers and princes. Describing this type of life of Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī, his comrade, the poet Ibn Sa'ad, says,

I studied with him a long time and we initiated the kinds of pleasures of our consciences, and he was a fan of the target of our passion, the collection of our pleasures and wishes at Al-Fidhiyya Marj (The Silver Meadow,)

¹*Al-jowāniyya* is a certain philosophy appreciating the interior of things rather than the exterior.

Al-'Arūs (the Bride), As-Sultāniyya and Shintabos. We are hardly free to watch in those roles and palaces; and the youth remained elongated, and the desire of the soul there is restricted, and with us were the faces-artists that help the minds, and bring from the beauties and the creative works with all types of things. (Isa, 1991)²

The leading role of the poet Sahl al-Isrā'īlī was highlighted by critics of his time, particularly the famous medieval critics Abu Ḥassān ibn Ḥarīq Nara (died 1225), Abu Safwān ibn Idrīs (died 1222); Ibn Lobāl (died 1285) and Ḥāzem al-Qartājannī (died 1285) (Mones, 2002: p. 924).

3. The Love Poetry of Ibn Sahl Al-Isrā'īlī: Love or Ṣūfism

Researchers and critics collected poems written by Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī in one poetry book, which was published in various editions and investigations. The 1967 edition of Dar Sāder, Beirut, by the researcher Iḥsān Abbās (born 1920-2003), is the most important of all, owing to the fact that it is the first and most comprehensive in terms of its content.

Through an extensive reading of this dīwān—one recognizes how much poetry Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī employed to talk about the subject of love, especially *Al-Muwashshah* (*muwašṣah*). In these poems, an adored man named Mūsā (Moses) emerged (Sarkīs, 1928: p. 9), which obliges critics to take a number of divert approaches: based on the common love in Andalusian poetry, Moses is either a figure of reality and, thus, love becomes the love of men love men; such type of love was common in Andalusian civilization, *albeit* rare. The other assumption is that readers are faced with an abstract earthly personality, but its extensive connotations will inevitably lead readers to an allegorical- Ṣūfī meaning. It is very likely that Moses may be a symbol of the Prophet Moses, and, therefore, of the Judaism from which Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī descended. The character may also stand for God. In doing so, they are influenced by the writings of dozens of Arab-Ṣūfī figures in Andalusia, especially Ibn sib'in, and Muḥyī ed-Dīn ibn al-Arabī.

If the first is to be neutralized, based on the fact that the biography of Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī does not suggest that he was a gay or a homosexual, the other assumption will impose itself more strongly, especially since the subject of Ṣūfī love prevailed in the space of Andalusia. The patrons of mystic poets had talked about a character they flirted with, but this character symbolized “the great cosmic truth, i.e. God Almighty,” in the words of Ṣūfī celebrities. This is exactly what Muḥyī ed-Dīn ibn al-Arabī did with his lady, al-Nazzām and Omar al-Khayyām with 'A'isha (Chittick, 1974: p. 67).

Some critics have viewed Moses' character in Ibn Sahl's al-Isrā'īlī's poetry as a real character drawn from the space of Andalusia assuming it was Mūsā bin 'Abdul Ṣamad, a Jewish poet contemporary with Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī, best known for writing love poetry.

²All quotations from Arabic including titles of references were translated to English by the authors.

Still, there is room for other opinions. Based on the popularity of employing Moses as a lover in some poems by some Jewish poets in Andalusia, the character is a mere mask hinting at the eternal nostalgia for Judaism. Mūsā may be a poetic motif that is intended to express Judaism as a general feature shared by all Jewish writers in Andalusia. What supports this opinion is the fact that some of the poetic evidence observed in this study shows Moses as the adored character in other poems, too. See, for example,

Why has Moses submitted to God when
The flash of His light flooded and veiled him?!
And I was shocked by Moses' light
If I were able to stand when I see it.
(Abbās, 1967: p. 18)

Moses' love for Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī has become a distinctive theme of his poetic writings. Once and more again he continues to assert that he is infatuated by the magic of Moses and that his fondness is ascribed to his constant depression. The poet always expects to win this love, but what is surprising is that Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī persistently supposes that he is evermore indebted to Moses (Manāhel, 1953: pp. 11-12). This type of relationship is reminiscent of the Ṣūfī monologue, and the relationship between the *murīd* and God, before the *murīd* reaches a situation in which he experiences the two ceremonies of *ḥolūl* and *it-tiḥād*. Through these two phases the *murīd* reaches his Creator, to be spiritually cleansed in the path of Ṣūfism until he becomes a Ṣūfī *murīd*. Examining Ibn Sahl's poems in this respect, one realizes that his love monologues confirm this view. Put differently, the voice of the poem by Ibn Sahl demonstrates the spirit of Ṣūfism. In the following extract, Ibn Sahl does his best to exhibit the essence of Ṣūfism or to undergo the path leading to it. He says.

I was shocked and I called Moses in my mind (*khāṭiri*)
The Ṭūr of patience from his desertion has become as dust
And they said I ask about him or may be his love will dominate you,
After love is there the land of ingratitude and atheism?
I become familiar with – May God abstain you from desertion – ornaments
So I wrote from my poetry and tears a string.
(Abdullah, 1988: p. 65)

Before discussing the above lines, it must be noted that infatuation in Ṣūfī thought is love, and love, as Ṣūfism says, is the third case of Ṣūfī conditions, which is the basis of all the high conditions; it is the will, and the goal of the people in love is not the will, because the will is related to the Old (God) unless it implies coming close to God. As for the Creator's love for His servants, it is the will, of course for mercy is more than will, and love is more than mercy (Lings, 1975: pp. 45-50; Helminski, 2000: p. 52).

In the verses above, it is difficult to determine the personality of Moses being mentioned, especially since the poet mobilizes many details concerning the bio-

graphy of the Prophet Moses, for he employs the *Ṭūr* and ‘crushed’ and “the land of ingratitude” and “atheism” (Al-’Arabī, 1926: p. 11). Evidently, the employment of these terms is reminiscent of the Quranic verse 143 in *Ṣūrat Al-’Arāf*.

When Moses came to the place appointed by Us, and his Lord addressed him, He said: “O my Lord! show (Thyself) to me, that I may look upon thee.” Allah said: “By no means canst thou see Me (direct); But look upon the mount; if it abide in its place, then shalt thou see Me.” When his Lord manifested His glory on the Mount, He made it as dust. And Moses fell down in a swoon. When he recovered his senses he said: “Glory be to Thee! to Thee I turn in repentance, and I am the first to believe.”

As for the verses above, Ibn Sahl says that he was shocked when he called Moses with his mind, and his patience collapsed in front of this call (Abdullah, 1988: pp. 65-66). People tell him asking about Moses or his love will dominate him but Ibn Sahl is familiar with this path of love, for which poetry is organized, as he says in the last line.

The question which arises in this regard is: Who is Moses, who shocks Ibn Sahl with his love, and exercises the act of such intense domination that Ibn Sahl has become a hostage to his love, and to whom he writes poetry? Moses, as described above, will undoubtedly be a figure with an ideological and intellectual dimension, a character that seems to range from two characters: Moses the Prophet, confirmed by the use of Qur’anic dissonance with regard to crushing of the *Ṭūr* owing to the fear of God; the second character could be a super-spiritual figure or a multiple of spiritualities. Everything then submits to it just as the *Ṭūr* submits to God, as stated in the Qur’an. The second meaning reinforces the premise that Moses is an inclusive *Ṣūfi* figure whose features may seem earthly, but whose connotations are purely mystical. However, this poetic image places the reader amidst bewilderment when Ibn Sahl says,

Moses invalidated magic in the past,
And Moses came today with magic.

(Al-Ishbīlī, 1998: p. 39)

Moses the Prophet, as Ibn Sahl reckons, annulled magic long ago, but Moses came today with his new charm. This extract indicates evidently the presence of a real Moses, who has so much significance and impact that he can charm people (Abdul Razzāq, 1993: p. 153). But what type of magic does he use to charm people? What fascinates people? Does he fascinate them with his poetry or with his religious status?

The extract may reflect the phenomenon of the prevarication of pretenses inherent in the poetry of Ibn Sahl al-Isrā’īlī and, thus, it cancels one interpretation which is the fact that Moses in question is the Prophet of God, i.e. Moses, who represents Judaism from which Ibn Sahl sets off and has intense passion for. But before we rush to the previous judgment, the extract especially the first line raises another question, why does Ibn Sahl al-Isrā’īlī insist on employing the cha-

racter of Moses the Prophet as opposed to the abstract Moses? There is one logical answer: his being a symbol of Judaism and continuation with it. Perhaps it is quite to the contrary. Moses denotes a nostalgia for Ibn Sahl's past and Judaism.

The critic Iḥsān Abbās adopts the second assumption above, and makes Ibn Sahl a lover of Moses, being a symbol of Judaism from which he stems, and Moses is a symbol of love as Abbās (1967: p. 17) sees it. Abbās builds his opinion on the criticism of Ibn Sa'īd from the Middle Ages, who believes that Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī has managed very well to make use of evasiveness for he borrowed the technique of flirting with males in order to express his love for Judaism. Furthermore, so as not to fall into the circle of accusation of his love of Judaism, he again managed very well to use an abstraction of Moses once, and Moses the Prophet at another time (ibid.:18).

Is the use of the character of Moses the Prophet, which is celebrated and ennobled by the Islamic religion forbidden in poetry? Certainly no. Critics have even increased the value of poetry and literature, which debate and employ religious texts through techniques that we call "intertextuality" in the literary modernity today. This awareness was, therefore, obtained by Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī, who knew very well to use the tool of masking through Moses, who became, in the expressions of literary modernity, a poetic mask for indirect talk about the poet's orientations.

This course of thinking supports the hypothesis of the research that Moses is an earthly mask expressing the poet's Ṣūfī tendencies (Haidar, 1999: p. 11). It must be noted that in the era of Ibn Sahl and his present, Ṣūfī thought and the contents of Ṣūfī poetry spread, particularly flirting with earthly figures to reach the supreme beloved "God". In this particular era, some mystics have flirted with a beautiful earthly lady as an inspiration for reaching the heavenly beloved. The famous Ṣūfī poet and thinker Muḥyī eddīn ibn al-'Arabī (1165-1240) excelled in this field. He lived in the same place and in the same period of time as Ibn Sahl. Although there is not any source that confirms any real connection between the two figures, communication and intellectual influence naturally did exist, especially when we talk about Ibn al-'Arabī, whom critics consider a complete school of Islamic mysticism, and whose thinking has greatly influenced medieval philosophical and creative writing to this day. The poets were influenced by Muḥyī eddīn ibn al-'Arabī's book *Turjumān al-Ashwāq* and his excessive flirtation with a lover called "The Eye of the Sun" ('Ayn Shams). Ibn al-'Arabī approaches his concepts based on intellectual consideration. His writing is not subject to systematic regulation, which is encountered by speakers and philosophers, but often invokes his spiritual experience. In other words, in his writing, he resorts to his spiritual experiences which are influenced by what he is inspired by the conditions and *maqāmāt*, or Arabic prosimetric literary genre known as *Saj'*, in which rhetorical extravagance is noticeable (Eckhardt, 1983: p. 23). Thus, Ibn al-'Arabī's texts have become intractable and, consequently, subject to many paths to reading and interpretation (Belqāsim, 2004: p. 19). Critics and medieval charlatans flocked to explain Ibn al-'Arabī's *dīwān*, noting that his love is earthly

and his beloved is a worldly reality (Snir, 2002). The indications of 'Ayn (the eye) in Muḥyī eddīn ibn al-'Arabī's poetry are numerous. It is the link through which the poet tells about the beauty of the Righteousness, and the beauty of His names. It is also the tool which he uses to reflect the God's image. The Eye of the Sun ('Ayn Shams) in the above mentioned poem is the same signifier as the one endorsed by Ibn al-'Arabī through which he tells about the beauty of the beloved seen in the light of the sun (Hakki, 2002: p. 93). Then, Ibn al-'Arabī himself came and wrote his book, *Thakhā'r Al-'Alāq: Sharḥ Turjumān Al-Akhlāq* in which he exposed his Ṣūfī inclinations towards his beloved. In so doing, Ibn al-'Arabī becomes the focus of the attention of many writers, poets and critics, especially since he is the first throughout the history of literature to write a *dīwān* and follow it with its explanation. He also came up with the idea of flirting with an early beloved with a heavenly mystic intention in public. Some Ṣūfī figures, however, preceded him. Omar al-Khayyām, for example, flirted with 'Aisha, who stood for his beloved heavenly "God." What supports this opinion in this study as well is the fact that some references in the biography of Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī state that he looked ugly but was an intimate, well-mannered person (Abbās, 1967: p. 18). His ugliness inevitably led him to the path of Ṣūfism, which was not explicitly declared, but he employed it through masked writing in which he imitated the great Arab mystics.

This certainly reminds us of the vicissitudes of the Abbasid poet Ibn al-Rūmī, whose ugly personality has proven to be a key to the masked Ṣūfī orientation in his writings (Naamneh & Assadi, 2022: pp. 3-5). The ugliness of Ibn al-Rūmī's appearance and his Christian roots are certainly comparable to Ibn Sahl's Jewishness and unattractiveness both of which led to the two poets' Ṣūfī inclinations. As a matter of fact, the parallel between the two poets can be extended to their childhood and the stages of their growth paradoxically filled with intellectual achievements let alone the surrounding political environment.

The theme of the courtship, wooing or love characterized the poetry of Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī to the extent that his critics focused their notes on the subject of love only, thus making him hostage to this subject and of course his Jewishness. In Al-Muqarrī's (1995: pp. 68-69) words, "he combined two humiliations: The humiliation of infatuation and that of Jewishness", which were reflected in his poetry. In one poem, he said,

And my pain boils with burning embers
 You see him on his cheeks getting dewy and cool,
 It asks me of what religion kiddingly,
 And the assemblage of my belief in his love is loose,
 My heart is my Abrahamic religion, but my eyeball
 is *Majūsī* from the cheek of fire worshipping.

(Al-Ishbīlī, 1998: p. 23)

At the surface level, it appears from the verses above that the poet is in pain. This pain will vanish when he sees another absent lover referred to by the third

person pronouns: “him” and “his” in the line “You see him on his cheeks getting dewy and cool.” This absent lover asks the poet playfully about his religion. In response, the poet has no love but that love which merges all the religions in which the poet believes, i.e. his Judaism and Islam to which he belongs. In the last couple of lines, the poet explicitly declares that the love of the heart is his two Abrahamic (*Hanīfī*) faiths, in addition to a third religion, the combiner of all, which is the love of the adored, to which he is linked just as the Magi is connected with fire.

At the deeper level, it is noted that there is an implied import that inevitably refers the readers to Ṣūfī meanings. In fact, this poetic discourse inevitably hints at a famous Ṣūfī speech for al-Ḥallāj, one of the greatest Arab mystics, who has a parallel poetic statement:

Oh breeze of the wind, tell the deer:
The roses have not but increased my thirst
For the lover whose love fills my organs;
If he wishes to walk on my cheek, he walks.

(Ibn Zinjī, 1998: p. 166)

It may be understood through the verses of Ibn Sahl that there is a Ṣūfī lover, who coalesces all types of love and regards all Abrahamic faiths on an equal footing. Its attainment occurs by heart and love. The poet’s heart and love are a path, as he says, to reach the Lord of the two *Hanīfī* or Abrahamic religions in which he believes: Judaism and Islam.

Evidently, Ibn Sahl has built a great deal of his poetry which denotes the theme of Ṣūfī love on the grounds of poems popular in Arab-Islamic culture. The theme of mysticism which he expressed in an implied manner was a “simulation” and a “recreation” of trendy literature in his time. It is the same simulation that Aristotle spoke of when he defined literature and poetry, affirming that literature was an imitation of living reality or at least an attempt to imitate the popular existence of literature and dominant public culture. It is also the same element of tradition that the famous Arab critic Ḥāzēm Al-Qartājannī spoke of in the Middle Ages. As said by him, poetry is a translation of the state of the culture that is popular in every era, as the poet writes while influenced by those around him through the elements of analogy, symbolism and composition, without directly revealing this influence. These three elements are all present in the previous verses in particular, and in the poetry of Ibn Sahl al-Isrā’īlī in general.

What supports the previous idea is that Ibn Sahl al-Isrā’īlī was living in the capital of Andalusia, where a vast culture of literary criticism reached its peak. Thanks to the Andalusian critics, the aesthetics of poetry and literature were founded, and they established the criteria and conditions of their availability. Poets and writers implicitly wrote according to popular critical dictates, by which they measured the beauty and the themes of their poetry. In his amazing *Kitāb al-Shi’r wa-al-Shu’arā’* (*The Book Poetry and Poets*) the famous critic Ibn Qutaybah (c. 828 - 13 November 889 CE/213 - 15 Rajab 276 AH) calibrated poe-

try and attuned its beauty. Similarly, Ja'far Ibn Qudāma (c. 873 - c. 932/948) criticized poetry and categorized it according to his criteria in his famous book *Criticism of Poetry (Naqd al-Shi'r)*. Likewise, Ibn Abd Rabboh al-Andalusī (860-940) in his important book, *Al-'Iqd al-Farīd (The Unique Necklace)*, defined and criticized poetry. These books in addition to numerous others have always been present and influential in the poetry of Andalusian poets. All of them spoke of coding, allegory, pun, metaphor and literary masking, as high aesthetic foundations for poetic writing.

When Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī was influenced by the authors of his time and his predecessors, he had influenced other contemporary poets using the same concepts and standards described above. He became a forerunner in the employment of ready-made Ṣūfī symbols, such as the deer of the neighborhood, and the adored male. The famous Andalusian poet Lisān Eddīn Ibn al-Khāṭīb (1313-74), who came very shortly after Ibn Sahl and in the same environment, was influenced by Ibn Sahl and took from him a poetic chorus, submerged with flirtation with a Ṣūfī lover, symbolized by the deer of the neighborhood. He says,

Did the deer of the neighborhood know that she heated
The heart of love that she settled on my broom?
It is so intense and pulsing just like
The wind of *Ṣibā* playing with the spark!
(Ash-Shak'ah, 1975: pp. 412-413)

The poet wonders if his woman knew about his love to her for he longed for her the same as a deer cleansed of dirt longs for its homeland. He adds that his heart beats so intensely that it is like a spark with which the wind of *Ṣibā* plays.

In his poetry, Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī used Ṣūfī vocabulary and motifs intentionally (Khafājī, 1992: p. 523). He, for example, compared the beloved woman with a gum branch (Ashraf, 1973: p. 3), or a green branch, a deer, a deer of the neighborhood (Amin, 1995: p. 219), and the reddish eyes (Ibid.; Nettler, 2003: pp. 2-3; Arberry, 1966: pp. 15-17), the heart, drinking (Ghannam, 1979: p. 248) the intoxication (Dāwood, 1997: p. 316), the awakening (Nettler, 2003: pp. 2-3; Arberry, 1966: pp. 15-17), the wine (Qareeb Allah, 1999: p. 77), the bartender (Ibn Al-'Arabī, 1972: p. 288), the veil (Ashraf, 1973: p. 55), the full moon (Arberry, 1966: pp. 33-35), the rose- the flower (Amin, 1995: p. 219), and the connection (Ashraf, 1973: p. 33), which is the most important mystical term ever.

In his poetry, one finds what confirms the truth above. Ibn Sahl says,
I love him, till the eye gets accustomed to its wakefulness
Because of him, and my limbs are pleased with sickness.
(Al-Ishbīlī, 1998: p. 54)

The poet loves the absent lover till he sleeps reassuringly, and his limbs are pleased till the lover comes to mind, even when he is sick (Khafājī, 1992: p. 523). The deeper level of the meaning, however, takes a different course, which is motivated by a few indications. One factor is related to the poet's use of a male lover

to court and flirt with instead of a woman. That male lover becomes a cure when the poet is sick and a friend when he is asleep. The view of getting pleasure and happiness in the most difficult moments is paradoxical, and, thus, innovative. Still, this attitude is not completely queer. Scholars of mystic philosophy have witnessed this phenomenon in the Ṣūfī thought of al-Ḥallāj, for example, who is happy in the presence of his lover, God, in the toughest moments of his life, even when he dies. He shouts at the moment of his murder as his companion Ibn Zinjī says: "Kill me, my trustees! In my killing is verily my life!"

According to the account of al-Ḥallāj, the poet's killers took him to the bridge then left:

There was Mohammed bin Abdul Samad, and his men gathering around the council, and when it Tuesday's morning dawned on the 6th of Dhe al-Qi'dah, Al-Ḥallāj was taken out to the center of the council. The executioner was ordered to whip him. A countless number of the average people gathered. He was lashed to the full thousand whips during which he did not ask mercy or groan. But when he reached 600 whips, he said to Muhammad bin Abdul Samad, 'I pray for you, I have advice that is parallel to the conquest of Constantinople.' And Muhammad said to him, 'I have been told that you will say this and more than this and I am not going not to halt the beating by any means.' When he (the executioner) reached 1,000 whips, his (Al-Ḥallāj's) hand and then his leg were cut off, then his other hand and then his other leg, and his head was fractured and his body burned. I came at this time and I was standing on the back of my animal outside the council, and the body fluctuated on embers and fires, and when it became ashes it was thrown into the Tigris River." (Ibn Zinjī, 1988: p. 84).

Ibn Sahl says,

And he tortured my soul, God bless his,

And made me wakeful. May he not taste the taste of wakefulness!

(Al-Ishbīlī, 1998: p. 45)

In these lines, there is something that confirms the presence of the Ṣūfī idea again. This beloved man, who has tortured the poet's soul, does not become a despicable person. On the contrary, the poet asks God to protect him against all types of evil, despite the suffering the lover has caused him. Logically, there is no one that asks mercy for his torturer except those who converse with God, whose judgment one accepts with complete satisfaction. This idea is the same Ṣūfī principle which is based mainly on several verses in the Holy Quran. In verse 156, *Surat Al-Baqarah*, God praises those "who say, when afflicted with a calamity, 'We belong to God and to Him we shall return.'" In *Surat Al-Ṭūr*, verse 48, God addresses his Messenger saying, "And be patient, [O Muḥammad], for the decision of your Lord, for indeed, you are in Our eyes [i.e., sight]." The subject of satisfaction is very important in Ṣūfī thought, particularly in the thought of the famous Islamic mystic Bishr al-Ḥāfi.

Ibn Sahl Al-Isrā'īlī resorted to the method of the easy but complex in writing (*Sahl momtani*) (Khafājī, 1992: p. 523), which is the method employed by the

medieval Arab mysticism. It contained simple unrefined words, but the meaning was difficult to interpret. The complexity is due to the Ṣūfī meaning inherent in the poetic images. Arab Ṣūfī figures have succeeded in submitting a simple, ordinary language to their will to express complex mystical imports, to the extent that speech has become a barrier to the ability to express the size and momentum of the Ṣūfī idea put forward. The method was best explained by the medieval mystic celebrity Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Niffārī, (died 354H), when he said, "The wider the vision is, the narrower the phrase is" (Al-Niffārī, 1934: p. 2).

This easy-but-complex language, with its mystical masking, symbols and signs, as Ibn Sahl's foes believed, was a reclining billow, where he was able to express his Judaism, the religion he loved and yearned for. In addition, it allowed him to run away from Islam which he converted to unwillingly under the pressure of social and political dictates. The Arabs in Andalusia said, "Two things cannot be true, Ibn Sahl's conversion to Islam and the repentance of Zamakhsharī from *Mu'tazilah*³" (Al-Zayyāt, 1990: p. 308). This statement about Ibn Sahl may help us judge the thematic poetic orientation of Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī. It can be said that according to this argument, and the claims of various critics, the other subjects of Ibn Sahl's poetry (courting is not included) were artificial. Critics of his time believed that a poet suffering from personality disorder, as a result of a shift in a previous religion, could not be honest in a praise poem and Ibn Sahl wrote dozens of praise poems. The question is: How can he praise Arab religious figures when he does not feel that he belongs to Islam in the first place?

What obfuscates this matter even more is the existence of contemporary and old critical voices, which regarded Ibn Sahl's conversion to Islam was true and that he was faithful to it. They based their attitude some verses of his poetry, where Ibn Sahl says, for example:

I was entertained by Muhammad's veils, I was guided!
 And if it were not for God, I would not have been guided,
 And that was not out of dictation
 But the law of Moses was disrupted by Muhammad.
 (Al-Ishbīlī, 1998: p. 56)

Ironically, these same verses can give the opposite meaning (Mones, 2002: p. 924). The opening clause, "I was entertained," undermines the faithfulness and seriousness of Ibn Sahl's conversion. Thus, one is made to read the whole meaning against its superficial and outward import. Ibn Sahl might have been ironical and he resorted to pun and connotation. He might have been referring to His guidance to maintain his Judaism. And in the last line he frankly says that he has never hated Judaism, but converted to Islam because it neutralized Judaism (Abbās, 1967: p. 46; Khafājī, 1992: p. 542).

Judaism with its inheritance, practices and its various books is still present in

³Al-Mu'tazilah, also named Ahl al-'Adl wa al-Tawhīd, in Islam, refers to an Islamic school of speculative theology (*kalām*) that thrived in Basra and Baghdad in the 8th-10th century.

Ibn Sahl's poetry. These references may have been a nostalgia for Judaism, and a way to express that nostalgia, while the method of employing the Şūfī level was another outlet for expressing that nostalgia. In his Şūfī poetry, Ibn Sahl employed the stories of Moses and the stick, and stories from the time of leaving Egypt (Abbās, 1967: p. 64).

4. Ibn Sahl's Employment of Şūfī Vocabulary

Şūfī vocabulary often reveals itself in Ibn Sahl's poetry. Any reader who is familiar with Şūfī writings and their dictionary can simply identify the ready-made Şūfī vocabulary. He says,

He visited at night, so I remained out of my joy thinking
 -If he visited me- the truth was false;
 I said: This is his ghost, this is not his person,
 And love blinds the sight.
 And how much I went to bed thinking the ghost a person
 Thinking goodness doesn't visit conceitedly,
 The night of the connection lowered its veils, in the horizon a jealous person appears
 And the star falls jealously;
 Drinking in the glasses a star of beams,
 Kissing in the hoops an enlightening full moon
 Before the meeting excitedly, when he generously granted me the meeting, I
 died out of pleasure.
 I'm dead either way, but
 Abandoned death as an abandoned lover.

(Al-Ishbīlī, 1998: p. 15)

The intensity of the use of Şūfī vocabulary in the verses above is notable. See, for example, the following words and terms: Truth; love blinds the visionary; the connection; drinking in the glasses of a star of beams; enlightening, excitedly and granted generously. Along with the use of this list of vocabulary, there is an import of the Şūfī idea. The poet cannot use all this momentum of vocabulary arbitrarily, without establishing a mystical idea through it.

The first word in the first line shows that the beloved is the sole Şūfī beloved, i.e. "God." The verb "visit" confirms that this God is the One and Only; the Eternal, and Absolute. This beloved is the destination of every Şūfī figure. So when He makes His visit, He visits everyone and settles in them. The poet uses "visit" instead of "visits me." If he had used the phrase "visits me," it would have been assumed that the beloved was an earthly figure (Khafājī, 1992: p. 66; Al-Zayyāt, 1990: p. 77; Abbās, 1967: p. 64).

Owing to his intense happiness, the poet thought the visit of his beloved was fake. Referring to his beloved as a male, the poet says that his male lover visited him in his imagination and not in his person, as Ibn Sahl says in the third line, thus giving further evidence regarding the essence of the Şūfī lover: "God." This

shadow, that had visited the poet in his imagination, and because of his infatuation, was thought to have been a realistic earthly person. It is the same love that was introduced by Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya, or Rābi'a al-Baṣrī (c. 714, 717 or 718-801), the renowned Arab Muslim saint and Ṣūfī mystic who roamed the streets at night flirting with her adoration as if he were a person of reality (Smith, 2010: p. 252). Likewise, Ibn Sahl in the above lines reaffirms the Ṣūfī thinking through relating to the idea of "connection" or "joining" (*wasl* or *wisāl*). In a dark night, the beloved lit up his thoughts, which is a clear a reference to the ritual of mystic love.

Ibn Sahl shares the elements of nature in this ceremony. On the rhythm of this meeting of love between the two lovers, the star is jealous and the full moon unveils itself, an image which leads the reader to the general poetic image in the Andalusian *muwašṣaḥ*. It is the image of employing elements of the universe and nature co-existing in harmony with man. See, for example, the parallelism between Ibn Sahl and the meaning in the following lines in Lisān Eddīn ibn Khaṭīb's *muwašṣaḥ*:

You see the roses jealous and grumbling
Wearing of rage what can be worn
And you watch the ace⁴ intelligent and smart
Eavesdropping with the ears of the horse!
(in *Mukhtār min muwašṣaḥāt al-Andalusia* 1984)

And Ibn Sahl drinks the wine of the lover in the glasses, the ecstasy of the meeting. But he dies before the meeting out of longing, as he says, so what will happen if he meets the lover? When the poet meets his beloved, he also dies of over-joy. So, Ibn Sahl says in the last line, he will die either way before and after Ṣūfī love. If this is the case, then he concludes he prefers to die while endorsing the religion of the adored.

In another poem, entitled "Ḥasnā" ("Belle"), the poet says;

And she is a flowering sight; perfumed scent,
An invented creation of musk and light
Tender as the panicked antelope,
But she walked like a grouse walking un-panicked.
And I wrote with my white fingers with a black thing,
Just as the musk (deer) derives the branches of *kāfūr*!
(Al-Ishbīlī, 1998: p. 39)

In the poem above, the theme of courting is dealt with in an open manner as if the reference is addressed to a terrestrial girl, or at the very least, that's how the traditional reader might understand it. This bright, flowered and scented woman is so beautiful that the viewer thinks she is created from musk and light; she is as thin as a terrified antelope, and she walks as thin as a grouse walking slowly. She

⁴The ace tree is a rare aromatic and beautiful tree used on many occasions such as weddings and holidays.

has covered her fingers with black palms from which she puffed the musk. Beyond doubt, this literal interpretation connotes a deeper sense saturated with allegorical implications indicated by words like “antelope,” a clear Ṣūfī item. This approach, as has already been indicated, is characteristic of Ibn Sahl’s style where he often woos a terrestrial girl to the extent of infatuation.

In the poem “A Kiss,” Ibn Sahl says,

They say if it weren't for a kiss, the heat of infatuation would have healed,
Does he who love the full moon desire kissing?
And if the blamers had lost sight of him, I would have kissed his shoe!
I'd cleanse him to mention the neck and mouth.
And who can give me a promise so that I can complain about un-fulfilment?
And who can give me a covenant so that I can complain about treachery?
And I am not the one who the wind holds his secret,
I am jealous so as not to reveal to him a secret!
And the foe tells me - and I have deeply fallen in love
May he grant me patience in the ruthlessness of his imagination!
“Have you not seen: Be patient to every disaster!
And I said, “Have you not seen? Maybe he has an excuse?”
If the group of the envious came with their magic,
Then I Moses' glances there is a miracle which nullifies the magic.

(Al-Ishbīlī, 1998: p. 39)

In this extract, Ibn Sahl says that a kiss has the power to heal the loving soul, but is this kiss enough for a lover who worships the full moon? This rhetorical question ennobles the beloved through his tragedy or comedy. Ibn Sahl is over praising his lover whom he is ready to kiss his shoes and nick. Moreover, he continues to overstate his attachment to his beloved, whom he expects impatiently to make him a promise or a covenant to meet. However, Ibn Sahl is unlikely to keep the secret of his eternal love. In the light of this exaggerated love, an informer advises him to be patient at a time when he is overpowered by love. It is the voice of the blamer that the poet later reveals by saying “the category of blamers,” which blame the poet for his experience of transcending or exaggerating love. This blamer reminds the readers of the power of the blamers in *Jāhiliyah* and in medieval poetry. It is the same voice that exercises its control over the poet and tries to stop his overcoming in love and is answered by the *Jāhiliyah* poet's rejection.

Ibn Sahl's love for Moses, as indicated in the last line, remains “the supreme love,” and the strongest of all the bad people. As he says, if the group of the envious is full of magic, then Moses' glances there is a miracle which nullifies the magic. The questions to be asked in this regard are: What makes the blamers or the abusers blame the poet for his love? And is it forbidden in the first place? The poet is usually blamed for a forbidden love or a love that goes beyond morality and community custom. If Ibn Sahl's love for Moses is a Platonic and spiritual love, why is he even blamed?

The answer lies in the possibility that Moses is a man whom the poet loves in the manner of a male love which is a love that is absolutely forbidden in Andalusian community custom, in Islamic religious norms in Andalusia and even in Judaism. But what denies this assumption is the biography of the poet known by critics and historians as a person with no unusual sexual tendencies. Moreover, homosexuality and love of men did not spread excessively in the Andalusian communities. Therefore, we are obliged to return to a distinct hypothesis: Moses is a symbol of the religious ego from which the poet rises. It is an abstract, earthly image that reaches the great cosmic truth "God." But, why is he in love with Moses, rather than Muhammad? Once again Moses is a primarily Islamic religious figure, *albeit* Jewish holding Jewish thoughts. The poet chose Moses as an umbrella symbol to inescapably reach the adored figure of the Şūfī poet, i.e. "God." Who is the blamer then? The answer seems to be related to some Jewish monks and priests who chase Ibn Sahl for abandoning Judaism.

In his poem *Zakāt* (alms) Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī says,

I swear by my father the eyelids of my torturer and mine
Are what brought me my death!
I didn't think my eyelid before her
Would take me from a look to a fascination!
May God kill the eyes because
They judged us to a state of love and humiliation!
And I covered the love between my limbs
Until my tears spoke of my affairs.
The signs of love cannot be hidden, far from that!
The suspicious one almost said, 'Take me.'
In my eyes, there are glances of an antelope
Dragged by guards whose residence is a lions' din!
They blocked the roads before me fear their road,
But their security measures are not applied to a ghost!

(Al-Ishbīlī, 1998: pp. 78-79)

In this poem we once again observe the difficult experience of love undergone by Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī. Its focus is the adored woman reflected in an antelope. This expression may inevitably lead us to think again about the identity of this adored antelope, and the fact that the antelope symbol was chosen to tell about the beloved. The mystical dictionary of the poem may help us quickly decode the meanings being derived from the world of Şūfism. Eyelids, love, the suspicious one, and covered love are all known to be Şūfī vocabulary. Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī says that the torment of his love is caused by the glances of the eyes of his lover and he never thought that he would be the victim of this love. It was this love and these glances that, after he had tried hard to hide his tormented love, made him live the way he did until he collapsed, wept and suffered from weakness and humiliation.

The apparent transparent meanings may refer to the story of a poet who loves

his mistress in the manner of Platonic love, especially since the meanings may fit a picture of spiritual love, in which the poet cries for a love that has been tyrannical. Such a love reminds us of the Arab Platonic love that resounds in the Arab ears and its culture, and as we read these verses we may hear the voice of Abū Firās al-Ḥamdānī (932-968) from the heart of the Abbasid State at its end, and he loves and cries for the torment of this love:

If the night exhausted me and I extended the hand of love
And I humiliated tears whose characteristics are pride.

(Khafājī, 1992: p. 76)

The love of our poet, Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī, may also be influenced by those resounding voices in Arabic literature, which loved to the extent of crying! But what if this crying is the result of a love that is not necessarily Platonic, like the love of the Mutanabbī, whose body was severely whittled, but is a love of another kind?

What happened to me that I conceal a love that has whittled my body
And nations claim to love Saif Al-Dawlah?

(Abbās, 1967: p. 67)

But at the heart of all this, the last line in Ibn Sahl's poem above surprises us; it breaks the doubt with certainty, and establishes a reality and a love that we defend in this study: It is the mystic love inevitably, and the word "road" confirms it. The road is a basic term in Ṣūfī thought; it is the origin of the Ṣūfī approach and the rec to its love (Al-Zayyāt, 1990: p. 88). Everyone has blocked the road in the face of Ibn Sahl to reach his eternal adoration, but he unavoidably knows the path, and the question is: How can they prevent him?

The answer seems to be in his Jewish community's attempts to persuade him to return to Judaism, his original faith and leave Islam. It may be the examining glances of his Muslim community that doubt his Islam. At the nucleus of all this, he chooses his way to his "moose" or to his earthly adoration, which is a shadow of his supreme infatuation. Once again, we see Ibn al-'Arabī's famous Ṣūfī experience in *Turjumān Al-Ashwāq*, where he used a terrestrial beloved to refer to the heavenly woman, and this experience is fully demonstrated in the Andalusian place and time.

5. Conclusion

This study followed the poetic production of Ibrāhīm ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī. An attempt was made to examine the various symbols, historical signs and masks, particularly the mask of Moses, which the poet used to express the complex state in which he lived, i.e. his conversion from Judaism to Islam.

Through an interpretive reading of his poetry, we tend to assume that Ibn Sahl deviated from the boundaries of the Judaism, the religion from which he came and of the traditional concept of Islam, towards a new thought, which is Ṣūfī philosophy. Ibn Sahl seems to have been influenced in depth by the medieval

writings of the Muslim mystics, particularly the writings of Muḥyī Eddīn al-'Arabī. The poet wrote love poems which seemed like the traditional love poetry common in Andalusian and Abbasid Arabic poetry at the time. But it turns out to be a padded love poetry by which he intended to attain the love of God.

Ibn Sahl resorted to this path following the troubled psychological, societal and human reality he experienced. He was Jewish and declared his embrace of Islam but some versions affirmed that he endorsed Islam against his will or sullenly. In addition, as a writer, Ibn Sahl wrote in Arabic but he was the son of Hebrew.

In an attempt to get rid of all these disturbances, Ibn Sahl adopted Islamic mysticism. He knew that Islamic mysticism believed in one monotheistic religion: God and His eternal love. It demolishes the boundaries between religions and, thus, it allowed him to escape the complex and distressing situation where he had to show his distinct religious affiliation or to choose between Hebrew and Arabic.

The result was that his poetry was a marvelous work of art similar to that diagnosed by Julia Kristeva, in the context of her discussion on intertextuality. Indeed, his poetry is a "mosaic" of ideas, masks and intertextuality. Above all, his poetry reveals the spirit of God that while putting a mask, he flirts with constantly.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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