



IDENTITY AND “IKHTILAF” (DIFFERENCE/ANOMALY) IN SUFI DISCOURSE The “I” and the “other”

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Sufi discourse has always been marginalised because it is commonly regarded as heretical. However, although it has been condemned by others as incompatible with the Shariah and accepted aesthetic norms, it has never ceased to exercise its right to be different and, while it is at odds with the “official narrative”, it shares the same principles. It is the different approaches to understanding those principles that have led to different interpretations being placed upon them.

When the “official” discourse ceased to be regarded as “an interpretation” and instead became a set of “hard and fast rules set in stone”, it began to condemn every alternative approach that differed from it or disagreed with it. Consequently, its own “interpretation” acquired the status of Holy Writ and assumed the force of Law; and indeed, it is mainly for this reason that we find calls today for a reinterpretation of our heritage and a review of some of the concepts that have become

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injunctions and – with the passing of time - accepted as legally binding. However, if we deconstruct and analyse any one of those concepts, we will find that it represents just a single possible interpretation out of many.

So the Sufi movement suffered marginalisation and rejection and remained excluded from official history, condemned on the basis of criteria outside its own frame of reference and seen as an “other” that was incompatible with the officially accepted “knowledge system”. The prevailing attitude “dismissed and isolated the Sufi movement from the intellectual/social mainstream and Sufism [became] the ‘rejected other’ in society. This may be attributable to the fact that Sufis describe themselves as ‘*ahl al batin*’ (‘people of the hidden [interpretation]’), as opposed to those whom they call ‘*ahl al dhahir*’ (‘people of the self-evident/literal [interpretation]’)”.¹ In adopting those terms the “*ahl al batin*” found themselves generally rejected – in contrast to “*ahl al dhahir*” which has connotations of a certain historical, intellectual and ideological authority.

Sufis have always been at a disadvantage vis-a-vis the official establishment, which has imposed its views by coercion rather than the strength of its arguments, and through pressure rather than the power of knowledge. Official culture has always been at the “centre”, while the other versions have remained on the fringes, and it has thrived through its institutions and – unlike Sufism - as an embodiment of legal correctness.

As an “encoded language”, Sufi scripture conceals its meanings more than it reveals them, so consequently they remain obscure to their reader. It expresses the “‘*maskut ‘anhu*’ – the ‘unsayable’ – because it occupies an ‘esoteric, shifting space’. Consequently, the knowledge [it conveys] is to be found in the ‘unspoken space’”.² It fluctuates between two poles – that which is expressed and that which is unspoken – that is to say, between the revealed and the concealed.

So its discourse is “buried in the unsayable”. It only reveals to the extent that it also conceals. It hides many of its concepts and wraps them

1 Adonis: *Al Sufiyyah wa'l Suriyaliyyah*, Dar al Saqi, Beirut, 1st impression, 1982, p. 26.

2 Mohammed Shawqi al Zain: *Ta'wilat wa Tafkikat, Fusul fi'l Fikr al 'Arabi al Mu'asir*, Al Markaz al Thaqafi al 'Arabi, Casablanca, Morocco – Beirut, Lebanon, 1st impression, 2002, p. 91.

in the esoteric language that it uses to express them, so that its “unseen face” can only be perceived through an understanding of the structure of its system and the conditions upon which it is founded and which have given rise to it.

Every form of discourse loses its radiance and vigour when the details of its secrets are exposed to the harsh light of day and – in contrast - it is this factor that has enabled Sufi discourse to thrive over the ages. The “*maskut ‘anhu*” has shown itself susceptible to numerous interpretations, depending upon the era, the culture or the individuals who encounter it. Indeed, scripture shows a greater tendency to survive and retain its impact the more its manner of expression casts a veil over the things being examined, and in this way it becomes more open to different interpretations, none of which would claim to have the “final say”, since the process is an ongoing one which branches into new and different directions without invalidating the previous ones.

The ego – or the “I” - cannot exist without the “other” since identity can only exist when the ego is distinguished from the “other”. “In order to know the ‘other’ you must see it as it is, not as you are”¹ – i.e. by recognizing both the ego and the ‘other’”. This is because “the ‘ego’ can have no identity without the ‘other’”².

Logical thought establishes itself through reasoned interaction between the ego and the thought (logic/reason) – i.e. through deduction based upon the assertion “I think, therefore I am” (in the sense that the “thinking I” is the same as the “existing I”). However, a Sufi does not see this as proof that he exists because he does not establish his existence by means of thought; rather, he sees things in terms of “‘*ana’l akher*’ (‘the I is another’) – a position we can express as ‘I think, therefore not I’, as the Sufis say”.³ Adonis calls this “the Sufi ‘*Cogito*’”, because for a Sufi existence is not based upon the existence of a separate ego; the Sufi

¹ Adonis: *Al Sufiyyah wa’l Suriyaliyyah*, p. 254.

² ‘Ali Harb: *Khitab al Hawiyyah, Sirah Fikriyyah*, Manshurat al Ikhtilaf, Algiers, 2nd impression, 1429AH/2008CE, p. 43.

³ Adonis: *Al Sufiyyah wa’l Suriyaliyyah*, p. 239.

ego only exists through Allah, so consequently the "Sufi *Cogito*" could be expressed as "the I is another'. This means that from a subjective point of view existence can be 'a thing', while from an objective point of view it can be 'another, antithetical thing'. So existence is simultaneously itself and other than itself, like the ego, which is simultaneously 'I' and 'another'"¹. The ego, therefore, cannot exist without the "other". This "other" may be present in the ego and thus comprise two identities; indeed, it may be an indication of my existence and a manifestation of my ego, since this "other" is present in oneself and 'exempts' that which is absent, and it is near to the same extent as it is far"².

The "other" may be something that differs from us in our essential selves, our genders, our beliefs or our national identities, while in a sociological context "the other is not necessarily geographically remote, a historical enemy or a permanent rival. In fact, the self may even be divided against itself so that one part of it is at war with the other part".³ Conflicts of this kind may result from different models of "knowledge systems", and in any case there is no sociological model of a single society in total harmony with itself.

A person who differs from us, then, is not necessarily someone of a different gender or with a different set of beliefs; differences and incompatibilities within a single community may simply be due to the fact that there is no such thing as a homogeneous society except as an ideal that can never be achieved. The concept of identity comes from this composite structure of the ego and "the different other I": "At the same time, looking at things in this way has the effect of legitimising all cultural expressions, although it requires [any] scientific investigation or progressive enterprise to examine those expressions carefully, with the aim not of rejecting them but of understanding them;"⁴ this will create the right

¹ Ibid. p. 248.

² 'Ali Harb: *Sirah Fikriyyah*, p. 43.

³ Haidar Ibrahim 'Ali: *Surat al Akher al Mukhtalifah Fikriyyan, Susiyulujiyyat al Ikhtilaf wa'l Ta'assub*, Majallat Naqd li'l Dirasat wa'l Naqd al Ijtima'iyy, No. 10, Algiers, undated, p. 5.

⁴ Abdul Karim Ajhar: *Su'al al 'Aalam: Al Shaikhan Ibn 'Arabi wa Ibn Taymiyyah min Fikr Wahid ila Fikr al Ikhtilaf*, Al Markaz al 'Arabi, Casablanca, Morocco – Beirut, Lebanon, 1st impression, 2011, p. 23.

conditions for us to interact with the heritage of our past while coming to terms with ourselves.

Unity and homogeneity can only exist hypothetically. In reality, the ego exists as one of many different things that differ from it and react with it as elements that are either compatible or incompatible with it. Homogeneity does not exist; indeed, knowledge can only be "produced" through interaction and exchange and it is linked – sociologically – with difference; homogeneity, on the other hand, only generates repetition of the same pattern. When the concept of identity is limited to that model, confined within the ideological parameters that define it and prevent it from being receptive to the "other", "it will only be understood through one form of its [potential] expressions, and this leads – implicitly or explicitly – to the elimination of the alternative cultural expressions, despite the fact that those other cultural expressions may [have the potential to] exercise greater weight and a more powerful impact in the public arena"¹.

"Congruence" may be defined as repeated production in a successive, replicated form. "This concept has had a major impact on the written word and has established trends that continue to 'plough the same furrow' within the same prevailing sets of ideas. In doing so they stifle the development of other ways of thinking that seek to explore other territory [that will lead to] new and different writing"². These "other ways" would have the potential to come up with new and different ideas and visions; the greater the distance and difference, the more clearly defined and sustainable the ideas, because "difference generates meaning and creates substance; if things are not distinguished from each other, it will not be possible to know anything"³.

We may conclude from the above that no discourse has the right to claim superiority over any other discourse, particularly when it differs from it. The "official culture" is based upon certainty, stability and an

¹ Ibid. p. 23.

² Adonis: *Musiqa al Hut al Azraq (al Hawiyyah, al Kitabah, al 'Unf)*, Dar al Aadab, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st impression, 2002, p. 183.

³ 'Ali Harb: *Sirah Fikriyyah*, p. 44.

authoritarian approach; on the other hand, Sufi discourse is based on change, transformation and metamorphosis, because it is inspired by “*ma’rifah*” (gnosis), or intuitive knowledge, and is “a child of its moment”. The Sufi vision approaches the same object but from a different angle since perception varies according to circumstances. Indeed, there are differences of perception between one Sufi and another. A Sufi constantly reassesses the way in which he looks at things as well as the way in which he describes them. Consequently Sufi “*ma’rifah*” familiarises us with things we did not know before or – alternatively – reacquaints us with things that were already familiar to us. It is a process of continuous renewal.

The clash between the two forms of knowledge – “official” knowledge and Sufi gnosis – arises as the result of a conflict between two different and contradictory systems and structures originating in two distinctively different natures or characters, so that consequently the “*Dhahiri* scholars” (scholars who follow the “literalist” interpretation) find themselves in opposition to the Sufi path of knowledge: “This critical opposition indicates that Sufi knowledge is free from the controls and limits that make specious assertions impossible”¹. It is this factor that led a leading *Dhahiri* scholar like Ibn Hazm to conclude that Sufi assertions require proof, on the grounds that “inspiration is pretension devoid of evidence”². From a rational point of view such a statement makes perfect sense (and Ibn Hazm attempted to understand Sufism through logic and the intellect – that is to say, to interpret perception on the basis of proof, which in principle is a self-contradictory approach that would discredit Sufism). Ibn ‘Arabi, on the other hand, resolved the issue on a cognitive epistemological basis and maintained that a person who reads the heart through the intellect is without knowledge.

Ibn Hazm judged the logic of the heart with the intellect; in other words, he used the “permanent” as a means of interpreting the “mutable”. This was of course an exclusionist approach, since Sufi knowledge, which

1 Naji Husain Jawdah: *Al Ma’rifah al Sufiyyah, Dirasah Falsafiyah fi Mushkilati’l Ma’rifah*, Dar al Jil, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st impression, 1412AH/1992CE, p. 218.

2 Abu Muhammad bin ‘Ali bin Hazm: *Al Ahkam fi Usuli’l Ahkam*, edited and revised by a committee of scholars, Dar al Hadith, Cairo, Egypt, 1st impression, 1404AH/1984CE, Part 2, p. 20.

is by nature anti-intellectual and only thrives when reason is absent, is a form of gnosis known as “*dhawq*” (literally “taste” – i.e. knowledge of the Divine through first-hand experience) and “‘*dhawq*’ is a subjective matter so the only way to [attain] it is through [personal] experience”¹. Hence Ibn Hazm judged Sufi discourse in terms that are not applicable to it; that is to say, using arguments that are not valid when applied to Sufism; even so, “Sufis [themselves] do not deny that there are discrepancies in their pronouncements – [discrepancies] that critics regard as contradictions”². Sufis understand that there are different levels of knowledge, perception and acquisition, and that is why they divide knowledge into the “*dhahir*” (“apparent/visible”), in which the meaning floats on the surface, and the “*batin*” (“concealed”), in which the meaning is hidden in the depths. However – since they recognize the “other” and the fact that it also has a right to its own form of knowledge – they do not exclude or reject the “*dhahir*” approach, though they do not regard it as the only valid one.

Commenting on those who rejected him and his like, Emir ‘Abdul Qadir el Jaza’iri remarked: “We do not dispute with them; on the contrary, we show mercy to them and pray for their forgiveness, and we find excuses for them in ourselves for their rejection of us”³.

Sufis have never rejected the intellect gratuitously, but they objected to its being used in the wrong circumstances – i.e. in situations in which it was unable to fulfil a useful function. Their denial of the intellect did not mean that they were incapable of using it, but rather that the Sufi “*ma’rifah*” structure is not based upon it. Were it not for this factor the Sufis would have distinguished themselves as scholars of logic and philosophy and used proofs to support their arguments. There is no clearer example of this than al Ghazali, who had a deep knowledge of philosophy and wrote a brilliant critique of it. Indeed, he was a logical rationalist of

1 Mohammed bin Buraikah: *Al Tasawwuf al Islami mina’l Ramz ila’l ‘Urfan*, Al Habib Encyclopaedia of Sufi Studies Series, Dar al Mutun li’l Nahr wa’l Tarjumah wa’l Tiba’ah wa’l Tawzi’, Algiers, 1st impression, 1427AH/2006CE, Part 1, p. 84.

2 Naji Husain Jawdah: *Al Ma’rifah al Sufiyyah*, p. 219.

3 Emir ‘Abdul Qadir al Husaini el Jaza’iri: *Kitab al Mawaqif fi Ba’dh Isharati’l Qur’an ila’l Asrar wa’l Ma’arif*, edited by ‘Abdul Baqi Miftah, ‘Ein Malilah, Algeria, 1st impression, 1426AH/2005CE, Part 1, p. 89.

the highest order, yet at the same time he shunned the evidence-based approach. The distinctive thing about the Sufis is that their knowledge is not rational; it is received from the heart as a result of inspiration. It is "from beyond the bounds of the intellect and the phenomena of the intellect, beyond the [different] forms of [conventional] acquisition and book learning"¹.

Despite what has been claimed, then, Sufis are not incapable of exercising their intellects and powers of reason. The real issue here is the nature of the Sufi system of gnosis, which operates within a totally different structure from the structure of the intellect. This is something which Zaki Naguib Mahmoud failed to grasp when he contrasted the irrational (i.e. Sufism) with the rational by focusing solely upon the "technical" aspect and dismissing the possibility of an essential meaning or a gnostic dimension. Consequently, for him Sufism was technically acceptable, yet unacceptable as a source of knowledge because in his view its discourse consisted of nothing more than a play on words. This attitude reminds us of the *fuqaha'* (scholars of jurisprudence) who regarded Abu Nuwas's poetry as technically delectable but morally reprehensible. (Or as one of them put it: "He was brilliant, may Allah curse him.")

Rationalists, logicians, *Dhahiris* and positivists have concerned themselves with the rational at the expense of the irrational, focusing instead on reason, which is subject to the rules of time and space, "as if the intellect... has become not only a tool for investigation, but the prime yardstick. This leads ultimately to the nullification of the meaning of the transcendental, which is the fundamental logic and principle"².

It was on this basis that Zaki Naguib Mahmoud called for a selective reading of the legacy of the earlier generations, believing that we should "only accept those aspects of their heritage that are rational because they – as opposed to [those aspects that are] irrational – are compatible with the boundaries of its [i.e. the heritage's] place and time; [this is because]

1 Ibid. p. 89.

2 'Ali Harb: *Al Ta'wil wa'l Haqiqah, Qira'at ta'wiliyyah fi'l Thaqafah al 'Arabiyyah*, Dar al Tanwir li'l Tiba'ah wa'l Nashr wa'l Tawzi', Beirut, Lebanon, 2007 (impression unspecified), p. 234.

something that reason accepts on one day will be accepted by it every day, while that which satisfies the irrational among us on one day may not be satisfactory to him when circumstances change".¹ We can understand from this that Zaki Naguib Mahmoud classed rational knowledge as an absolute that is not bound by the parameters of time and place but "imposes itself repeatedly", despite the fact that the history of philosophy itself proves otherwise. The rationalist al Ghazali ended up as a Sufi, as did the French intellectual Roger Garaudy and numerous other thinkers and poets.

Sufis give reason an even lower status in *dhawq*-related matters and class their knowledge as being "non-binding"; that is, they see it as reflecting "*halat*" (states of spiritual consciousness) experienced by the Sufi and acquired through "*dhawq*", creating a kind of tension within him that is beyond the scope of the intellect's perception. This form of knowledge, which may be defined as both "*hal*" (singular of "*halat*") and "*dhawq*", is variable and contingent upon the Sufi's "*hal*" and "*maqam*" (the stage reached by the soul in its search for God), in which the one "interpenetrates" with the other. Here "we are driven to remember that that the Sufi Masters had no intention of treating their knowledge as 'Law' or as binding upon others. First and foremost, in their view, it was a matter of attaining that Sufi '*Ta'ahhud*' ('Oneness' with the Creator) in which knowledge acquired through inspiration is a product, not a goal"².

When we look at Sufi discourse we can see clearly that it believes in "the other", just as it believes in diversity as the basis of unity. Thus we find that while Ibn 'Arabi was "*dhahiri*" in his acts of worship, he was "*batini*" in matters of personal behaviour and "*dhawq*". A quick glance at the literature of the Sufi heritage will show us how they aspired to rise above the ego and embrace tolerance in recognizing the right of others to be different.

Although Sufis have been concerned with the "*batin*", this does not mean that they have ignored the "*dhahir*". They have had dealings

1 Zaki Naguib Mahmoud: *Al Ma'qul wa'l Lama'qul fi Turathina'l Fikri*, Dar al Shuruuq, Beirut, Lebanon, 2nd impression, 1978, p. 464.

2 Naji Husain Jawdah: *Al Ma'rifah al Sufiyyah*, p. 220.

with other groups, sects and denominations and respected the fact that they are different; indeed, it was because of this that al Hallaj became angry with a man who had insulted a Jew and replied to him with these words: "My son, all religions belong to Allah, Glory be to Him...[those who belong to different] faiths do not choose them but they are chosen for them".¹ Al Hallaj did not even blame the men who killed him; on the contrary, he excused them because they judged him on the "*dhahir*" aspect of his words².

Similarly, Emir 'Abdul Qadir el Jaza'iri responded to his adversaries as follows:

"Our beauty is in knowing things of which you are ignorant

Through them we love the One Who guided and endowed us with His Grace

We are well aware of everything with which you have described us

And we know ourselves better than you do

To us you are pure souls

And to you we are filthy and ignorant"³.

We may conclude from this that tolerance and recognition of the "other" are vital elements of Sufi thought and practice: "If differences over matters pertaining to life and society are differences over interests and honour, differences over religion and belief are differences of *ta'wilat* (esoteric interpretations)"⁴ arising out of different visions, concepts, backgrounds and points of reference. Given his own point of reference, a Sufi generally tends not to become engaged in debates and disputes; however, "if [they are unavoidable] he says what al Khidhr said to Moses

1 Al Husain Mansur al Hallaj: *Diwan al Hallaj*, with notes and commentary by Mohammed Basil 'Uyun al Sud, Dar al Kutub al 'Ilmiyyah, Beirut, Lebanon, 2nd impression, 1423AH/2002CE, p. 153.

2 Ibid. p. 37.

3 Emir 'Abdul Qadir el Husaini el Jaza'iri: *Kitab al Mawaqif wa Ba'dh Isharati'l Qur'an ila'l Asrar wa'l Ma'arif*, Part 1, p. 93.

4 Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid: *Al Khitab wa'l Ta'wil*, Al Markaz al Thaqafi al 'Arabi, Beirut, Lebanon - Casablanca, Morocco, 1st impression, 2000, p. 58.

(upon both of whom be peace): you have knowledge which Allah has taught you and I have knowledge which Allah has taught me"¹.

We should recognize that there can only be an "other" when there is another, different, "other" that is not identical to it or congruent with it. If that were not the case, the element of differentiation could not exist: "Thus meaning and its system depend basically upon 'ikhtilaf' (difference)"².

In this case the difference is an inevitable consequence of the disparity between the "*dhahir*" and "*batin*" interpretations. In one respect they are the direct opposites of each other, while in another respect they complement each other. Sufis, who endorse both approaches simultaneously, regard a person who solely espouses either the "*dhahir*" or the "*batin*" as lacking in balance, while a person who combines the two is "complete"³.

A literal interpretation conforms in every detail with the wording of the text or scripture; in other words, it replicates it and regurgitates it and says nothing in addition to the original text; on the other hand, "a person will not stray off the right path if he claims that objective interpretation of literature is a matter that is relative, if not impossible, to achieve".⁴ A reader should not be a passive receptacle in his response to the text; rather, he should add something to it and emend it. In fact, "this relativity should mean that there is not just one interpretation of a particular topic, but numerous interpretations – as many as the number of readers and students [of the text], and they will differ from each other depending upon the different circumstances of time and place in which they read it".⁵ If we look at the matter in this

1 Emir 'Abdul Qadir el Husaini el Jaza'iri: *Kitab al Mawaqif wa Ba'dh Isharati'l Qur'an ila'l Asrar wa'l Ma'arif*, Part 1, p. 455.

2 Mijan al Ruwaili and Sa'id al Bazi'i: *Dalil al Naqid al Adabi*, Al Markaz al Thaqafi al 'Arabi, Casablanca, Morocco – Beirut, Lebanon, 3rd impression, 2000, p. 118.

3 Abu Hamid al Ghazali: *Mishkat al Anwar wa Misbah al Asrar*, edited by Riadh Mustafa al 'Abdullah, Dar al Hikmah, Damascus, 1st impression, 1417AH/1996CE, p. 101.

4 Yousuf Sami al Yousuf: *Muqaddimah li'l Nafari*, Dar al Yanabi' li'l Tiba'ah wa'l Nashr wa'l Tawzi', Damascus, Syria, 1997, p. 160.

5 Ibid. p. 160.

way, we will understand that the text offers extensive scope for different interpretations; "no [single] context is capable of defining the meaning of the text [definitively]"¹.

Between the text and its reader there may be either symmetry or asymmetry, consonance or dissonance. Sometimes the text speaks, while at other times it remains silent. It interrogates the reader and examines and tests his abilities, experience, culture, desires and personal preferences. As a scripture the text is a repository for the "known" (that which is said) and the "unknown" (that which is unspoken) in which the former leads to the latter. Every fresh reading produces a new meaning, creating a "dynamism of meanings. In other words, it does not offer certainties, but rather probabilities. It is a text that renews itself every time it is read, it is 'endless and undepletable' so that consequently. It is this [quality] that distinguishes works of creative poetry"² in general and Sufi texts in particular. They need to be read again and again because the possibility of discovering new meanings is hidden within them and cannot be found outside them, and it is this factor that gives them their "everlasting quality". "The different '*ijtihadat*' (interpretative judgements) and the wide range of '*ta'wilat*' (esoteric interpretations) demonstrate the diversity and richness of their meanings; that is to say, they highlight the vitality of the culture. After all, "*ta'wil*" presupposes a diversity of meanings and arises out of differences and disparities"³.

In Sufi discourse meaning is not something "perishable" or "transient" because it is not anchored to a fixed point of reference. Its substance consists of "the metaphysical meaning that evades any rational analysis, and which cannot be perceived from the first meanings that come into a person's mind".⁴ That is to say, the meaning remains "deferred" and "secreted" in the other interpretations or "readings".

1 Taha Abdul Rahman: *Fiqh al Falsafah, Part 1, Al Falsafah wa'l Tarjumah*, Al Markaz al Thaqafi al 'Arabi, Casablanca, Morocco – Beirut, Lebanon, 1st impression, 1995, p. 113.

2 Adonis: *Kalam al Bidayat*, Dar al Adab, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st impression, 1989, p. 27.

3 'Ali Harb: *Al Ta'wil wa'l Haqiqah*, p. 17.

4 Adonis: *Kalam al Bidayat*, p. 194.

So in Sufi discourse the only way in which the meaning exists in the text is through the presence of the reader. It is the reader who discovers it, adds to it or emends it. Without this element, his reading becomes merely an act of repetition or reproduction. On the other hand, the meaning will never die as long as there are "readings" that "do not know stability and permanence, but remain 'deferred' within the 'difference system'. They are free to move horizontally and vertically without the prospect of a particular ending"¹.

To put it in a semantic context, in Sufi discourse a shift between "*dall*" ("signifying") and "*madlul*" ("signified") does not indicate that there is an automatic link between them, particularly if "we understand meaning to be 'a reciprocal relationship between expression and substantive sense'"². However, in Sufi discourse the "*dall*" is linked to an infinite number of "*madluls*" which may not have been forcibly imposed from outside but from within the text itself as a result of repeated readings of it: "Hence any conflicts that may arise between interpretations of the discourse will generate an infinite series of '*madluls*', none of which can claim a monopoly at the expense of the others..."³

Consequently, there is no core meaning, but rather a splintering of open-ended meanings – a point noted by Ogden and Richards in *The Meaning of Meaning*⁴ with their observation that meanings multiply and give birth to other meanings so that "meanings proliferate in a way which [makes them] difficult to control"⁵.

So it is the reading, or interpretation, which gives a text its legitimacy, permanence and artistic value. The more open the text is to interpretation, the more receptive it is to the "other", with the result that it generates more meanings – meanings that proliferate in accordance with the number and

1 Abdullah Ibrahim and others: *Ma'rifat al Akher; Madkhal ila'l Manahij al Naqdiyyah al Hadithah*, Al Markaz al Thaqafi al 'Arabi, Casablanca, Morocco – Beirut, Lebanon, 2nd impression, 1996, p. 120.

2 Stephen Ullman: *Dawr al Kalimah fi'l Lughah* (literally "*The Role of the Word in Language*"), translated with an Introduction and Commentary by Kamal Bishr, Dar Gharib li'l Tiba'ah wa'l Nashr wa'l Tawzi', Cairo, 12th impression, undated, p. 177.

3 Abdullah Ibrahim and others: *Ma'rifat al Akher*, pp. 113-114.

4 Ibid. p. 252.

5 Mijan al Ruwaili and Sa'id al Bazi'i: *Dalil al Naqid al Adabi*, p. 119.

range of different interpretations. To quote al Tawhidi, “*Kalam ‘ala kalam sa‘b*” (“Utterance about utterance is difficult”), since it produces the disparate and different out of the homogeneous and compatible: “Nothing in creativity comes out of nothing, and that which is in the self is silenced in the presence of the ‘other’ - to a greater or lesser degree in one way or another”¹.

There are no boundaries separating one knowledge system from another; in one way or another they frequently share similar approaches in the way they classify thought. Even when certain concepts or methodologies are rejected they find their way surreptitiously into the thinking of their opponents, who unconsciously adopt them. Indeed, even Ibn Taymiyyah, who was well-known for his ferocious campaigns against philosophy, “*ilm al kalam*” (scholastic theology) and Sufism and “fiercely attacked thinkers who belonged to those fields in many places, also adopted their most profound ideas”².

As we indicated earlier, identity may be defined as “receptivity to the ‘other’”, since there can be no such thing as a homogeneous identity. Homogeneity – a state of being without differences – means total introversion and exclusive self-absorption, while difference creates harmony; provided, that is, that it recognizes the “other” in contrast to the ego, thereby enabling the two to interact and give birth to pluralism, diversity and a range of different views. “This has been accepted by the Shariah as a reality; it has never sought to deny or suppress pluralism, because the structure of its discourse – the Divine Discourse – includes a similar [kind of] pluralism which renders it [the discourse] open to the possibilities of [different] interpretations...”³

Rather than approaching the text as a beginner or in a passive, negative manner, the reader comes to it armed with the experience of his previous readings, all of which exert a subtle influence upon him: “When you read you apply your latent knowledge and the faculties you acquired

¹ Adonis: *Al Sufiyyah wa'l Suriyaliyyah*, p. 237.

² Abdul Hakim Ajhar: *Su'al al 'Alam*, p. 70.

³ Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid: *Al Khitab wa'l Ta'wil*, p. 60.

before [you began] reading”.¹ So reading is not just an immediate action, but the result of “previous accumulation”.

If a text has no more than one, single meaning, it becomes meaningless, one-dimensional, incapable of “plurality” or alternative possibilities and devoid of a “*maskut ‘anhu*” aspect: “It will be no different from monocular vision and will always remain incapable of understanding the full range of the creative process, which is a complex psychological and historical process full of potential”.² At the same time, it will also be unsusceptible to “*ta’wil*” and any person who reads it will be only a passive non-participator.

Meaning in this sense cannot exist in itself independently of the reader. This is why “eternal texts” are overflowing with ambiguity and “*ikhtilaf*” (difference/anomaly). They are complex and a single “*ta’wil*” can never do them justice; they require “a plethora of ‘*ta’wils*’”, some mutually compatible, others not: “They are engendered through the act of writing like a flowing stream in which the “*dall*” produces another “*dall*” in a non-stop game whereby the torrent of “*dalls*” does not allow a “*madlul*” to impose its presence; that is to say, to get the upper hand. It is this that gives rise to a resolve not to recognize the existence of boundaries restricting the meaning”³.

Consequently the text lends itself to numerous new interpretations that cannot all be contained within one “box”⁴.

Here the “*ikhtilaf*” lies within the structure of the language which conveys the meaning and its opposite; the text is generated by the language before escaping from its linguistic constraints, with the result that the meaning ceases to be confined within its dictionary-imposed limits and begins to enter the realm of other semantic possibilities. Consequently, discourse cannot be interpreted on the basis of its “dictionary language”.

1 Yousuf Sami al Yousef: *Muqaddimah li'l Nafari*, p. 160.

2 Fadhil Thamiir: *Al Sawt al Akher al Jawhar al Hiwari li'l Khitab al Adabi*, Ministry of Culture and Information, Public Cultural Affairs Publishers, Baghdad, 1st impression, 1992, pp. 139-140.

3 Abdullah Ibrahim and others: *Ma'rifat al Akher*, pp. 139-140.

4 See Taha Abdul Rahman: *Fiqh al Falsafah, Part 1; Al Falsafah wa'l Tarjumah*, p. 112.

Indeed, modern studies – particularly deconstructive ones – maintain that text is “language’s recalcitrant child; it differs from it and constantly calls it to account and changes it, so that it does not submit to the repetitive mechanical routine of an automaton”¹.

Considered from this angle, then, language is the substance of the text, yet at the same time it rejects it intrinsically, because it (i.e. language) is a fixed given in which the “*dall*” is connected mechanically to a certain “*madlul*”.

So there is no such thing as a neutral reading of the concept of “*ikhtilaf*”. Every reading seeks what it wishes to discover and excludes those things that it does not want. Hence reading is divided into two categories – the “present” (the structure of the text) or “*dall*”, and the “absent” (the meaning) or “*madlul*”. That is to say, the “*dall*” is present now and some of the “*madluls*” are also present now, while some are absent and deferred until such time as they are revealed in later readings. “This repetitive reproduction merely leads to a restructuring of the same ideas using identical words and replicated concepts”².

Considered from this point of view, a Sufi text is only “present in its absence and only absent in its presence. The presence of the transcendental [which is absent] reveals infinity; it reveals that this visible present is only an image that does not comprise it in its entirety, and that it is [in reality] absent”³.

When considered within the context of “*ikhtilaf*”, the “absent” lies concealed in the text and is hinted at by the “present” in gestures rather than words. Thus the text fluctuates between the “present” (the explicit) and the “absent” (the tacit): “In any case, the general text is not a homogeneous area or a tightly closed arrangement, or a uni-directional, one-dimensional discourse; rather, it is an interlocking, interwoven structure or a composition comprising numerous layers and elements,

1 Abdul ‘Aziz bin ‘Arafah: *Al Dall wa’l Istidlal*, Al Markaz al Thaqafi al ‘Arabi, Beirut, Lebanon – Casablanca, Morocco, 1st impression, 1993, p. 10.

2 Abdul Hakim Ajhar: *Su’al al ‘Alam*, p. 23.

3 Adonis: *Kalam al Bidayat*, p. 194.

which enables us to read in it – or reject - what we will. In this sense the text is alive and renews itself every time it is read and looked at from a different angle”¹.

It is reading that produces meaning. Meaning cannot exist on its own but occurs and multiplies as the number of interpretations grows. And even if they clash or supersede each other, no discourse has the right to claim superiority over any other discourse, since it represents just one interpretation out of many; it speaks and falls silent, pronounces and acquires, hints without expressing in words, and insinuates without declaring outright. In this way every interpretation tries to interpret hidden meanings within specific conditions, “particularly if the subject is an abstract one – or, to put it another way, when it is possible to say that every meaning is a violation of another meaning, and every definition is a ‘*ta’wil*’ of the discourse that leads to another ‘*ta’wil*’. This is our own situation with regard to ‘meaning’; we do not grasp its straight meaning or pure concept; rather, in seeking what lies behind the intention and meaning we find ourselves facing an endless chain of [possible] interpretations”².

A “one-dimensional interpretation” produces nothing more than a regurgitation of the text; it is identical to it because it is a “closed system” that does not accept the “other”. And as it does not believe that the “other” should be accepted, it is destined to remain static and monolithic with no “*ikhtilaf*” component. Consequently, it rejects the “other” and refuses to engage in dialogue with it, and this leads to conflict caused by a refusal to recognize anything but the “self” or any alternative, different or contrary interpretation. This in turn forces the rejected “other” to take steps to protect its identity, so the rejection becomes reciprocal.

In this context identity is not the same as “identity”. In fact, it can never be so. If it were, every member of society would be an identical copy of every other member. “Identity – in this sense – is a “closed entity”. As far as it is concerned, the “other” does not exist except insofar as it abandons

¹ Abdullah Ibrahim and others: *Ma’rifat al Akher*, p. 194.

² Ali Harb: *Al Fikr wa’l Hadath; Hiwarat wa Mahawir*, Dar al Kunuz al Adabiyyah, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st impression, 1997, p. 61.

its own identity and transmutes into the [same form as the “closed entity”] and becomes fused with it. It either praises the “other” for being identical to it or disparages it so that it can cast it out...”¹

So the concept of identity is based on the principle of “*ikhtilaf*”, or difference, not homogeneity. It is the “inconsistent within the harmonious” – that is to say, it represents “discord within unity”. The relationship within this “discord” renews itself in response to the renewal of the dialectic between the ego and the “other”, leading to either a closer bond or a separation.² This in turn leads to an inflation of the ego or mutual recognition between the ego and the “other” along with an acceptance of pluralism, diversity and the possibility of comparison. “*Ikhtilaf*” offers an opportunity to prefer, accept or reject something on a balanced basis. “This means that from a creative point of view identity is [to be found] not in producing the ‘same’ but in producing the ‘different’ – not the ‘one identical [model]’ but the ‘diversified many’. Identity is ceaseless creativity”.³ Without this element there will be no balance and no chance of comparison, because both balance and comparison require the existence of two different things and cannot be applied between one thing and itself.

Congruity and “identity” can do no more than familiarise us with the explicit world we already know, while “*ikhtilaf*” is concerned with the implicit – the unspoken or “*maskut ‘anhu*”. Congruity is a shorthand version of what has been said explicitly, or a variation within an imposed intellectual structure in which everything is essentially the same. Sufi discourse, on the other hand, can only be understood through “*ta’wil*”, since it goes beyond the “given” and reveals new levels of meaning, “so that it encourages the reader to become engaged with the language and begin to search for the hidden elements contained within it”⁴. In this way the process of reading helps reveal what has not been revealed and refamiliarise us with what we did not know. Indeed, “it helps generate new

1 Adonis: *Al Sufiyyah wa’l Suriyaliiyah*, p. 190.

2 See Haidar Ibrahim ‘Ali: *Surat al Akher al Mukhtalifah Fikriyyan, Susiyulujiiyyat al Ikhtilaf wa’l Ta’assub*, pp. 8-9.

3 Adonis: *Siyasat al Shi’r*, Dar al Adab, Beirut, Lebanon, 2nd impression, 1996, p. 69, and *Musiqat al Hut al Azraq*, p. 288.

4 Abdullah Ibrahim and others: *Ma’rifat al Akher*, p. 143.

concepts that rearrange the relationship between those cultural features that have already become familiar”¹.

Seen from this perspective then, language is the Sufi’s subject matter but it is also his greatest enemy. It is a vital tool for enabling him to reach the level towards which he aspires, but it can become an obstacle and a hindrance where the production of meanings is concerned. In such circumstances it is incapable of conveying the “unsayable” and becomes the Sufi’s adversary, since it is only able to reveal within a familiar, sensory context. Thus the Sufi finds himself inadvertently in the realm of the forbidden although he aims to avoid it.

This gives the “official” established discourse an excuse to reject the Sufi discourse and label as (in the “other’s” view) a synonym for error, freethinking and unbelief². Consequently, it is seen as “different” in a negative way, despite the fact that “difference is one of the features of Creation and the way to freedom and development, as well as an instrument for becoming acquainted with others. It enables meanings to be generated and it is a blessing and a mercy”³. Hence that which is different can become established within a harmonious whole – an anomaly contained within what is known as identity.

Despite this, as a reality which is an inevitable concomitant of human existence and diversity, “*ikhtilaf*” is not something that is sought after for its own sake. In fact, to quote Dr. Mustafa Nasif, ““*ikhtilaf*” is a right and every right is counterbalanced by an obligation. I do not live for the sake of ‘*ikhtilaf*’; I live for the sake of mutual compatibility... If I differ I am actually aiming for a better compatibility. I differ so that I can understand and I do not venerate ‘*ikhtilaf*’ for its own sake. ‘*Ikhtilaf*’ is not a goal”⁴ so much as an objective designed to establish a bridge of intercommunication and interaction. “*Ikhtilafs*” place can only be within a harmonious unity, and it is this combination which constitutes the concept of identity.

1 Abdul Hakim Ajhar: *Su’al al ‘Alam*, p. 23.

2 Adonis: *Musiqat al Hut al Azraq*, p. 287.

3 Ali Harb: *Khitab al Hawiyah*, p. 44.

4 Mustafa Nasif: *Nadhariyyat al Ta’wil*, p. 13.