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Poetry, mystique, cognition. Faḍīla aš-Šābbī and her poetic way to the transcendental truth

Religion, as a culture domain, embraces this sphere of human activity which depends on contact with what is supposed to be „holy” (sacrum)¹. Relations between literature and religion are very complex, regarding two elements – both literary piece of work and religion culture. The inner complication of a literary work increases when comes to its religious references. The literary work is immersed in tradition, saturated with symbolics, refers to different texts, and also contacts with the beyond-literary reality, which is not of the simple nature, since it concerns from the one side highly diversified and individual religious experiences, and from the other – generalised and variable tradition forms or broader contexts of religious sciences². The problem of sacrum appears in literature mainly through the Holy Scriptures. However, not only. Poets from the turn of the century tried to get closer to God, referring to myths and religious symbolics. Poetry was always the closest one to Absolute. Poetry was, still is and will always be one of the ways leading to the Highest Truth, thanks to its magic and ability to express the inexpressible. This is also the way which Faḍīla aš-Šābbī, one of the most outstanding modern Tunisian poets, chose.

She was born on the 24th of January 1946 in Tawzar (Tozer)³ in the old family dating back to many centuries, called Aš-Šābbīyya, from which Abū al-Qāsim aš-Šābbī⁴, the most famous Tunisian romantic poet, comes from. She graduated from the Arabic Language and Literature Department of Tunisian University. Then she worked in Beirut

¹ B. Chrzastowska, S. Wyśiouch, *Poetyka stosowana*, Warsaw 1978, p. 72.

² Ibidem, s. 70.

³ Town in the south-western Tunisia, on the border with Sahara; a beautiful oasis situated in the region called *Šaṭṭ al-Ġarīd* (“The Land of Palms”).

⁴ Abū al-Qāsim aš-Šābbī (1909–1934) – Arab poet from Tunisia; one of the first representatives of Arab romanticism; writer of reflective and pessimistic poems on love and death, and also poems concerning the problem of patriotism. Author of the poetry volume *Aġānī al-ḥayāt* (“Life Songs”) (1955) and the dissertation on Arabic poetry *Al-Ḥayāl aš-ši’rī ‘inda al-‘Arab* (“Arabs’ Poetic Imaginary”) (1929); he was a close relative (first cousin) and brother-in-law of Faḍīla’s father.

and Paris for some time. After coming back, she became a lecturer of literature in one of Tunis high schools. She retired in 1998 and since then she got strictly devoted to writing.

Faḍīla aš-Šābbī's works have many dimensions; one could compare them to a rapid river with a number of side streams. The process of writing means for her an everlasting, ceaseless search, which carries a lot of difficulties and sacrifices that you cannot put in narrow formal rules. She made her debut in 1961 by sending her story to a literary radio programme of Tunisian broadcasting company. The end of 60-ties marks her further steps in publishing her poems in the magazine *Al-Fikr* ("Thought"). In the same time, the avant-garde movement (*aṭ-ṭalī'a*) appears in the Tunisian literary scene, calling to restoration (*tağdīd*), experiment and going beyond all possible limits. Faḍīla aš-Šābbī becomes a part of this trend as one of its ten co-founders and members of the movement *fi ġayr al-'amūdī wa-al-ḥurr* and, what is remarkable, the only female voice⁵. Nevertheless, from the very beginning she tends to create her own vision, her own idea of reality and poetry, emphasising her individuality. She is an author of eleven poetry volumes written in classical Arabic, from which you could mention: a full of expression debut *Rawā'ih al-arḍ wa-al-ġaḍab* ("Scents of Earth and Anger", 1973); a love lyrics tome *Layālī dāt al-ağrās at-ṭaqīla* ("Nights of Heavy Bells", 1988), which was awarded with the prestigious poetry Wallāda⁶ Prize given by Spanish-Arab Culture Institute in Madrid; *Al-Ḥadā'iq al-handasiyya* ("Geometrical Gardens", 1989), a distinct inspiration from scientific achievements and – as the poet calls it – "geometrical obsession"⁷; a bilingual (Arabic-French) poem written as an illustration to 22 paintings of the French artist Colette Deblé⁸, depicting different images of women from the prehistoric times until the present day, titled *An-Nuqṭa wa-nisyān an-nār* ("Point and Oblivion of Fire"), published in 1996 in France; other volumes include: *Miyāh nisbiyya* ("Relative Waters", 1998); *Al-Uf'uwān* ("Adder", 1999); *Šurūq al-ašyā'* ("East of Matters", 2000); *Wādī al-af'āl* ("Valley of Deeds", 2001); *Za'ir aš-šabāḥ* ("Roar of Morning", 2002); *Šalawāt fi al-ayn* ("Prayers in Where", 2002); *Kitāb ar-riyāḥ* ("Book of Winds", 2003).

Faḍīla aš-Šābbī writes also poetry in the dialect of Tunisian South. As an example stand two volumes *Šmārīḥ* ("Stems", 1991) and *Ha aṭ-ṭayf al-'āqib* ("Here Is Passing Ghost",

⁵ Aṭ-Ṭāhir al-Hammāmī, *Ḥarakat aṭ-ṭalī'a al-adabiyya fi Tūnis 1972–1968*, Tūnis 1994.

⁶ Al-Wallāda (d. ab. 1090) – female poet; princess from the Umayyad family that ruled from 8th century in Spanish Andalusia; famous for her beauty, wisdom and poetical talent; she runned a famous literary salon in Cordoba, which gathered prominent persons, poets, writers, ministers; great love of a famous Andalusian classical poet Ibn Zaydūn (d. 1070).

⁷ Arab. *hawas handasī* – from the interview carried out with the poet on the 8th of March 2003 in Tunis; the term mentioned also in the poet's preface on the cover of the volume *Al-Ḥadā'iq al-handasiyya* ("Geometrical Gardens"), Tūnis 1989.

⁸ Colette Deblé (b. 1944) – French female painter living and working in Paris; displays from 1976; in 1990 she began a new endeavour in presenting paintings of women from the history of art; exhibitions in i.a.: Athens, Berlin, Boston, Sofia, Naples, Bucharest, Algiers, Tirana, Orlean, Brussels, Casablanca, Budapest... From each country, where the exhibitions were launched, the artist chose one author who was to write a text on her paintings; the most famous names include: Jacques Derida, Mohamed Bennis, Jacques Henric, Gilbert Lascoult etc.

2001) which are deeply nostalgic; in each verse the desert is echoed and a longing, wailing voice of the oasis's daughter is a lyrical subject⁹.

Faḍīla aš-Šābbī is also an author of two novels: *Al-Ism wa-al-ḥaḍīd* ("Name and Abyss", 1992) and *Tasalluq as-sā'āt al-ġā'iba* ("Climbing on Absent Hours", 2000), and literature for children: a bilingual (Arabic-French) volume *Al-Kawākib al-mā'iyya* ("Water Planets", 1995); *Aš-Šā'ir wa-al-'ālam wa-wardat aš-ṣabāḥ* ("Poet, World and the Rose of Morning", 1998); *Al-Ard al-uḥra* ("Different Land", 1999); *Ḥayy ṣayyād al-aši'a* ("Ḥayy – Hunter of Rays", 2001).

In many of her poems, especially those written in the earlier period, motives of God (namely as a god of snows, wind, water, war, etc.), goddess or other pagan idols appear, which makes the poet surpass the Islamic tradition. The later poems of Faḍīla aš-Šābbī, on strictly religious matters, her personal experiences of spiritual contact and closeness to Absolute, were collected in the volume titled *Ṣalawāt fī al-ayn* ("Prayers in Where"), published in Tunis in 2002, which reveals the poet's inspiration of Islamic mystical philosophy and tradition of the Sufi poetry, however presented in new, quite modern frames. It is worth mentioning that not only in the volume *Ṣalawāt fī al-ayn*, but also in the whole artistic output and creative attitude of Faḍīla aš-Šābbī – in her isolation, her poetical endeavour coloured with a deep reflection, contemplation of the universe and humanity, aiming at reaching understanding of the „truth” through u n i t y (my underlining) of science, philosophy and art – you can notice distinct analogies to the Sufi ideas, as it was rightly mentioned in Fātima al-Aḥḍar's study¹⁰. The continuous questions on the essence of poetry led the poet at last to the way of search of God. Did she find Him?

The lyrics from the volume *Ṣalawāt fī al-ayn*, that present a private, intimate and mystical experience, are characterized by fervour of writing, saturation with poetical style in symbolical function, sometimes even dialogical fragments when a lyrical subject tries to contact Absolute. The majority of poems are prevailed by pleading tone, atmosphere of deep reflection and deliberation, silence and evanescence, admiration for splendour and omnipotence of God. It is a very personal poetry, in most cases addressing the recipient, in others – it is usually descriptive. The poems' style is inspired, lofty, solemn and in the same time full of respect and humility. The poetical image of God, the image covered with a thick veil of ambiguity and mystery, emerges from relations of the lyrical subject coming out of his mystical and transcendental experiences of closeness to Absolute through not sensual contact. Is His cognition possible?

Who are you? Who are you?
I am asking you

⁹ M. Causa-Steindler, *Une meconnue renommee Fadhila Chabbi poetesse tunisienne*, IBLA, 1994, vol. 57, no. 174, pp. 253–273.

¹⁰ Fātima al-Aḥḍar, *Faḍīla aš-Šābbī aš-šā'ira al-mutawaḡġila fī kaṭāfat al-'ālam*, wyd. 2, Tūnis 2002, p. 87.

– asks the lyrical subject feverishly in the poem *Man anta?* (“Who are you?”). This is the point of departure for his poetic-spiritual journey through the path (*ṭarīqa*) leading to the Highest Truth, the same path that is chosen by Sufi adepts.

I touch the limits
I was led by the high tide
I was led by the low tide

The absolute submission and confidence in the transcendental power leads to the limits of cognition, which, however, cannot be completely crossed. The paths leading to those limits can be variable, sometimes similar, sometimes totally opposite, going in two contrary directions (“high tide” – “low tide”), however the truth hidden beyond them is only one. It cannot be reached through intellectual knowledge (*‘ilm*) as opposed to “heart seeing” (*ru’yat al-qalb*)¹¹, leading to the true cognition, the Sufi gnosis (*ma’rifa*). The following verse from the same poem reveals doubts in the power of mind and its rejection in favour of mystical knowledge:

I was approached by knowledge
That like mirage appeared and rose
Then I vanished in the distance
Surrounded by ripenning sciences for divine servants

Islam as religion calls upon its followers to the endless search of knowledge. The only truest truth is God – the creator and reason of everything.

He knoweth (all) that is before them
And (all) that is behind them,
While they cannot compass it in knowledge¹²

– nevertheless the faithful must aspire to cognition. The lyrical subject of the poem *Al-‘Umr anta fikratuhu* (“You Are the Idea of Life”) finds in it the transcendental truth – an idea, eternal intelligence, which the world emerged from. In the same time it is a fervent, full of adoration confession of faith:

You are Almighty, Powerful, Strong
You rise with dawn of sun
And you are the sunset
You are the idea of life
You are, you are my God

¹¹ From: R.A. Nicholson, *Aṣ-Ṣūfiyya fī al-islām* (“The Mystics of Islam”), trans. Nūr Ad-Dīn Šarība, Miṣr 1951, p. 55.

¹² Koran, 20:110.

In the first verse three of the ninety-nine Koranic most beautiful names of God (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā* – Koran 7:180) are mentioned; they are also His attributes (Almighty, Powerful, Strong). The divine being is an eternal power, stable and invariable in His might and perfection. This "Idea" is the beginning and end, west and east, birth and death, life. In the poem there is a mystical unification of idea, which is life, and life, which is the idea of the only eternal Creator.

In the poem *Af'āl tuḍī'* ("Luminous Deeds") the inspiration of illuminationism and symbolics of light are distinct. As-Suhrawardī (1153–1191) is considered to be the main representative of the Islamic illuminative philosophy, through the Koranic verse of light (24:35) as a matter of great importance, which is interpreted as a symbol of theory of emanation of divine light. According to this philosophy God is the Light of Lights (*Nūr al-anwār*), the essential reason for every being:

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth.

[...]

Light upon Light.

God guideth unto His light whom He will.

And God speaketh to mankind

In allegories, for God is Knower of all things.¹³

This Koranic sura is an ideal image of experiences of the lyrical subject of *Af'āl tuḍī'*, where God is the reason for everything and it is His power that makes the lyrical subject be led to the path of light and given illumination.

Silence is alive

A perspicacious sage has come

I was resting in the shadow of his arrival

Silence is alive

My master

Made me be luminous deeds

The shadow that in this poem symbolizes the lack of knowledge, act of waiting, is replaced, after the arrival of the "Sage", by cognition manifested in the "luminous deeds". The element of light marks here obviously the presence of God. It is also important in what circumstances the cognition and illumination occur. It is suggested by the double repetition of the verse: "Silence is alive", as the contact with the Absolute is possible only in complete silence and tranquility. Silence (Arab. *ṣamt*) is one of the main old, pre-islamic Arab virtues adopted by the culture of Islam. It symbolizes – in contrast to talkativeness – wisdom. Imam Abū al-Qāsim al-Quṣayrī (986–1072) in his treaty *Ar-Risāla*

¹³ Koran, 24:35.

Al-Quṣayriyya (Treaty on Sufism) divides silence into three types: exterior silence, silence by heart and spiritual silence. The hearts of those who trust in God are silent in waiting; the hearts of those who know mysteries are silent in the face of divine verdicts¹⁴. This sort of deep silence enriched with the attributes of alive beings accompanies the lyrical subject of the poem *Af'āl tuḍī'*, at first in his act of waiting and then in experiencing of closeness of divine wisdom's light.

In the poem *Yad ar-rahma* ("Hand of Mercy"), that is the sort of request or trusting prayer addressed directly to God, the fully aware and distanced from "mundane inattention" lyrical subject wants to take a mystical path (*ṭarīqa*) that would lead him to the "shrine of hope", i.e. to paradise and God. However, earlier the act of purification should occur, not only assuming purification of body, but also the soul, from the dirt of sins, evil deeds, covetousness, etc. But the lyrical subject does not wash his body with water, which is the basic agent of purification, but with night, which Muslim mystics consider to be time of waiting for light of Divine Truth ("[...] The night has come. I have washed my body with it"). However, it will not do, since you should purify your soul, but the lyrical subject does not know how to do it:

I asked as I was at the crossroads
How I am to wash my soul?

Merciful and loving God comes to rescue, God who manifests himself in the shape of "Hand of Mercy" coming out from a "glimmering river". The mystical symbolics is tripled here. Firstly, we have a hand (Arab. *yad*) which symbolizes blessing, divine power, providence, generosity and, of course, mercy. Secondly, the river – water which stands here for purification and clarity, source and beginning of all earthy life, and what is important – is a sign of divine mercy. And finally, light gleams (glimmering of river) reflect divine light and symbolize its closeness which the lyrical subject desires. Merciful God in his kindness and generosity took pity on him and fulfilled his humble requests:

[...] The bounty is in God's hand to give to whom He will.¹⁵

The motif of purification appears also in the next poem titled *Anta tarānī* ("You Can See Me") where the lyrical subject confesses:

You can see me
When I purify
My words of accumulated dirt
Of prickles that hurt only me

¹⁴ Comp.: Abū al-Qāsim al-Quṣayrī, *Ar-Risāla al-Quṣayriyya*, Polish trans. J. Nosowski, Warsaw 1997, p. 135.

¹⁵ Koran, 57:29.

Therefore, we can deal here not with purification of deeds, body and soul, as we have seen in the previous case, but purification of their signs – words which the real existence of the lyrical subject occurs in. So we can say about a specific meaning shift and mystique of poetical word. In this poem God appears as all-mighty, all-seeing and all-hearing whom nothing can be hidden from. It brings to mind words from the Koranic sura no. 6, in which we read:

Vision comprehendeth Him not,
But He comprehendeth (all) vision.
He is the Subtile, the Aware.¹⁶

Like a child misses its mother, Sufi longs for meeting of beloved God. “Longing for love (*šawq*) – we can read in *Ar-Risāla al-Qušayriyya* – is a need of hearts to meet a beloved person and as far as love is concerned it is longing for love.”¹⁷ This is longing felt by the lyrical subject in the poem *‘Aššyyat aš-šawq* (“Evening of Longing”):

The longing stopped on its evening
The chaos of evil deeds
Came with a heavy cloud
The tongue of taste gardens
Picked
And the heart to the gardens of good
Seized

It is remarkable that the longing comes in the evening, when the world is seized by darkness, which can also be understood as darkness of evil deeds what is besides suggested in the second and in the third verse. It is a distinct symbol of desire of God and longing for the dawn of His truth, which is nothing else than day and luminosity, according to the Sufi philosophy and symbolics. The poem depicts a mystical experience of loss of contact with the reality, loss of taste and sense (“the tongue of taste gardens picked”) and raising the heart to “the gardens of good” as symbols of paradise and closeness of the Ruling King. The longing results from boundless, strong and overwhelming feeling of love towards God (*al-ḥubb al-ilāhī*) that leads to the ecstatic unification with Him (*fanā*) – which is also the basic Sufi concept.

The motif of mystical love is also noticeable in many other lyrics of Faḍīla aš-Šābbī, from which you can mention *Hamīrat al-‘išq* (“Leaven of Love”) or *Anta al-ḡamīl* (“You Are Beautiful”). In both we find a description of ecstatic experience of boundless mystical love, sometimes bringing to mind closeness of sexual experience joined with the rejection

¹⁶ Koran, 6:103.

¹⁷ Abū al-Qāsim al-Qušayrī, op. cit., p. 327.

of mundanity, leading to the direct contact and unification with Absolute, as the following verses show:

He is beautiful and loves beauty
He got in love with me, pierced me with wind and deprived of my clothing.

Anta al-ğamīl ("You Are Beautiful")

I had rested on the point of truth
Before I got burnt
In the abyss, in the abyss I and he spent the night
[...]
He said: give
I satisfied my thirst at night
At night
Until the soul denied itself

Hamīrat al-‘išq ("Leaven of Love")

The motif of quenching the thirst (*rayy*) leads to the mystical rapture and complete annihilation (*fanā'*), the loss of existence to the extent that "the soul denies itself". The beautiful object of love reveals himself the ability to love ("He is beautiful and loves beauty"), and yet "[...] love of Truth (God) towards its servant (man) is Its Will, wish, showing special mercy on him [...]"¹⁸. Love is the path that leads to closeness and unification with God. The lyrical subject of the poem *Hayātī tilka al-qatra* ("My Life, This Drop") also asks for such a mystical unification of his poor life with eternal and infinite Life of the One who Lasts:

My God
My life has stopped
On the texts of my nothingness
This is my life
Put it to boundlessness of Your life

Man can only find the true happiness and consolation in God and His closeness in the face of which all of the mundane worries and values lose their importance, are denied until they vanish and disperse in non-existence:

Nor my pain, neither my joy, illusion or truth
Nor thought
Neither death running in the streets

¹⁸ Abū al-Qāsim al-Quṣayrī, op. cit., p. 318.

Or life with many branches
Has value to those who feel closeness

– says the lyrical subject of the poem *Dawū bu'd* (“The Distant”). However „seeing the Closeness is curtain drawn over Closeness”¹⁹. So is its true cognition and description possible? Does the vision of God appearing in the above mentioned poetical texts not a delusive mirage of longing for His closeness and satisfying His thirst in the bright source of cognition, which slips out of the sight? It seems that the great mystical Persian poet Ġalāl ad-Dīn ar-Rūmī was right claiming human impotence in understanding and expressing the eternal divine mystery:

If you even tried many ways to describe Him
You would come back empty-handed from each
And the mystery in its vagueness will stay.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 100.

²⁰ From: R.A. Nicholson, op. cit., p. 138, (my translation).