Towards the Retrieval of the Feminine from the Archives of Islam

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In a recent essay Slavoj Žižek asserts that the feminine is the secret repressed history of Islam (Žižek 2009:unpaginated). By referring to the story of Abraham and his slave girl Hagar (who bore him his first son Ishmael but remains unnamed in the Qur'an) Žižek concludes that despite the pivotal role of the feminine, it remains repressed in the archives of Islam. This paper is an examination of Žižek's assertions with the aim of taking his insights to their theoretical conclusions. With specific conceptual examples from Islamic mystical traditions, for example the "Creative Feminine" and the "Universal Perfect Man," I will argue that the feminine is not entirely erased from the archives of Islam. Exemplary females implicitly or explicitly noted in the Qur'an, for example Mary and Hagar, as well Muslim female saints and sages like Rabia, can easily be retrieved. In fact these names are often noted as examples of Islam's positive view of the feminine whenever the gender question is raised. However, because of the masculine self-same logic that structures the symbolic archives of Islam, the retrieval of the feminine upholds a signifying economy in which the masculine is privileged in all arrangements of signification. The retrieval of the feminine, even by female Muslim feminists, often results in implementing, institutionalizing, and authorizing male privilege and masculine supremacy. The structuring effects of the masculine-same imaginary (marking the privileged subject as always male) on Islam's archives necessitate a simultaneous recognition of the hermeneutical efficacy of the feminine while denying its link to the

biological woman. The woman remains the ontologically dependent gender and inessential other, never represented as a subject reflecting on her own being. She is an object of exchange within the masculine imaginary defined as: the structure that constitutes the subject through separation from the maternal source, entry into the social-symbolic order through language, and imposed identification (Anderson 1998:228).

Taking a cue from Žižek I will argue that the feminine is not a secondary effect of repression but the masculine imaginary's constitutive yet disavowed foundation. Therefore the possibility of retrieving the feminine as a universal category from the archives of Islam can be questioned on two grounds: a) there is no prehistoric unrepressed feminine outside of the masculine imaginary (synonymous with the archive) that one can return to or recover; b) the masculine imaginary itself is not permanent and incontestable, therefore its normative regulatory operations do not take a universal form, nor is there a universal strategy for unsettling it. In a Zizekian way I will conclude that a far more radical unsettling could be achieved through literal conformity to the masculine imaginary itself. This strategy of literal conformity reveals the hidden necessity of the masculine imaginary's reliance upon the chaos of the multiplicity of subjectivities that it claims to harmonize.

The Archives of Islam and the Feminine

Žižek locates an indication of the repressed founding gesture of Islam in the omission of Ishmael's mother, Hagar, from the Qur'anic tale of Abraham. The story of Abraham and his son Ishmael provides the basis for the ritual of Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five "pillars" of Islam, which is obligatory for every Muslim at least once in their lifetime. Ishmael is associated with the all-important act of building and purifying the Holy House, the Ka'aba, the focal point of the ritual of Hajj initiated by Ishmael and his father Abraham (Qur'an 2:125-7). Whereas the Qur'an mentions Abraham by name 69 times (second only to Moses) and Ishmael 12 times, and alludes to Sarah once without naming her (51:25-30), Hagar remains unmentioned. However, remaining unnamed in the Qur'an does not mean Hagar was entirely erased from the official history of Islam. This official history includes the collections of *hadith*, or prophetic traditions that form an integral part of Islam's archives. Relying on biblical sources, but attributed to the Prophet or his companions, the two standard collections, *Bukhari* and *Muslim*, for

example, contain extensive elaborations with considerable details of the myth of Hagar (Hassan 2006:152-3; Abugideiri 2001:81-107). The preservation and dissemination of Islam's sacred sources is heavily indebted to the presence of Muslim women (wives of the Prophet, for example) (Geissinger 2004). Muhammad himself relied on a woman, his wife Khadija, as the decisive verifier of the truth of his message at the most crucial moment of its genesis. It was Khadija who first believed in him. Through a few simple tests she verified and assured him of the divine source of his message. It was not just verification of the truth that came from the wives of the Prophet. In one instance Aisha, the Prophet's favourite wife, hearing the revelation of a verse of the Qur'an that, contrary to the required practice, allowed him to defer the turn of any of his wives and be with any one of them that pleased him, sarcastically remarked: "It seems to me your Lord hastens to satisfy your desire!" (Ibn Kathir 1998:1.293-298) However, the unfolding of Islamic civilization in the following centuries is characterized as increasingly androcentric and misogynist, repressing the feminine as its initial matrix (Ahmed 1992:41-78; Barlas 2002:7-10). The dialectics of this reliance-repression parallels the process of the psychosexual development of the subject where the possibility of subject formation is predicated upon the severance of maternal dependency. Of course this is not exclusive to Islam, but is a characteristic of the entire western civilization. Luce Irigaray's strong words are a reminder of this: "… the most everyday things and in the whole of our society and our culture … function on the basis of a matricide" (quoted in Whitford 1991:36). However, Islamic civilization's repression of the feminine does not entirely erase it from its archives. Time and again the dialectics of reliance-repression are repeated as the feminine is retrieved from the archives of Islam to implement, institutionalize, and authorize male privilege and masculine supremacy.

Positive images of *exceptional* Muslim women (other than Hagar and Khadija) are not unknown to the archives of Islam, especially in the Sufi tradition. This is in contrast to some other traditions like Kabbalah, which stresses the "demonic nature of women" and is historically and metaphysically an exclusively masculine doctrine (Scholem 1967:37). However, even when positive images of women are retrieved from the archives of Islam, they are found to be constitutive of normative gender identifications and divisions. For example, the name of the most famous Sufi woman of Islamic history, the eighth century (CE) mystic Rabia al-'Adawiyya, is often brought up in discussions of a positive view of women in Islam (Smith 1994, 2001). But through a narcissistic self-same logic that admits no alterity, an exceptional female mystic like

Rabia assumes the gender value of a male, she becomes an honorary man. (In the modern context we can observe parallel dynamics at work when the then U.S. Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice visited Saudi Arabia. Despite Saudi Arabia's overt sexism and racism she was exceptionally received as an honorary (white) man because of the power she represented.) In his monumental book, *The Memorial of the Saints*, when the thirteenth century Persian mystic Farid al-Din 'Attar includes Rabia among the all-male cast of extraordinary mystics, he has to apologetically begin the discussion by pointing out that an exceptional woman can no longer be called a woman, *she is a man* ('Attar 1968:72).

A positive image of Hagar has been presented by Riffat Hassan, who reconstructs her image as, "that of a woman of exceptional faith, love, fortitude, resolution, and strength of character" (Hassan 2006:154). Hassan relies on the traditions that record her story as having no hesitation in surrendering to her fate of being abandoned in an inhospitable valley with no food or provisions once she realizes that that is God's command (to Abraham). This black slave girl trusts the will of God, is guided by the Archangel Gabriel to the miraculous spring of Zamzam, and in Hassan's words becomes "the pioneer woman who led the way to the establishment of a new civilization" (Hassan 2006:154). I sympathize with Hassan's feminist project of recovering not a victim but a paradigm of an autonomous self-reliant mother in Hagar; one who becomes master of her own destiny, bypasses her powerful husband and takes her case directly to God. But Hassan's focus on the canonical outcome of this tale downplays or outright neglects the patriarchal structure of kinship and the ways in which its associated categories of class, race, and age impact the relationship between Sarah and Hagar. For example, she overlooks the reproductive context of patriarchy in which maternity is viewed as the only social power open to women who compete with one another for status as bearers of sons (Lord 1984:111). Reading this story through the prism of gender, we may ask: what would have happened if instead of forfeiting his family to danger and uncertainty Abraham was willing to sacrifice himself (presuming that disobedience to God's command would have resulted in his personal punishment)? (Fewell and Gunn 1993: 51-4) Other ways of looking at this story could find it to be the story of Hagar's exploitation by Sarah, a privileged woman, and both women played off against each other in their quest for status (Exum 1988:77). Or perhaps Sarah acted like a white slave mistress (Sanders 1995:131-138). What if reading against the grain of male imaginary we see Sarah and Hagar as "queer ancestors of faith?" (Kamitsuka

2007:81) Or perhaps in this tale we have an instance of surrogate motherhood; Sarah as a priestess and Hagar her "priestess-devotee" and the two as companions whose conflict was not about fertility but about the survival of an ancient Mesopotamian women-centered matriarchal culture against the emerging patriarchal one represented by Abraham. Perhaps the child was meant to be Sarah's heir, but Abraham (merely a sperm donor) transgressed this matrilineal custom when he claimed the boy as his own heir (Teubal 1990:xv, 59).

As one contemporary example, the Muslim philosopher/academic Seyyed Hossein Nasr refers to the "perennial teachings of Islam" concerning the "profound metaphysical relationship" between male and female as: a "primordial polarization" (Nasr 1987:48). (I have intentionally bypassed the examples of outright sexist and misogynist authors. Nasr's stance, referred to as "perennialist," claims to be representing the esoteric truth from the depth of Islamic tradition.) In a reading that misrecognizes contingencies of a social-historical condition, Nasr asserts that since God is the creator, "whatever ensues from the distinction between the two sexes must be related to His Wisdom and Providence." He continues, "The distinction between the sexes is not a later accident or accretion but is essential to the meaning of the human state" (Nasr 1987:48). This is an "ideological" reading of gender differences; "ideology" here designating what Žižek calls: "a contemplative attitude that misrecognizes its dependence on social/political reality." In this sense ideology is not necessarily false; it can be quite true and accurate as Žižek points out: "what really matters is not the asserted content as such but *the way this content is related to the subjective positions implied by its own process of enunciation*" (Žižek 1994:8). When considering the positive role accorded to sexuality in Islam, Nasr reiterates the premise espoused by some Sufis that the contemplation of female beauty aids man in his return to God. He reproduces oft-quoted words from the thirteenth century Muslim mystics Ibn Arabi who held that the highest contemplation of God is possible in woman, "… as the (Divine) Reality is inaccessible in respect (of the Essence), and there is contemplation (*shahadah*) only in substance, the contemplation of God in women is the most intense and the most perfect; and the union which is the most intense (in the sensible order, which serves as support for the contemplation) is the conjugal act" (Nasr 1987:51). Ibn Arabi writes that it was in beholding the face of a young Persian woman in Mecca that all esoteric knowledge was suddenly revealed to him (Nasr, 2008:74). The "Creative Feminine" espoused by Ibn Arabi is another concept that is retrospectively read into the

entire discourse of Sufism. As explained by Henry Corbin, by knowing his true self the (male) mystic realizes the Creative Feminine (combining both masculine and feminine) within his own soul (Corbin 1958:127). In this context, the feminine image of Mary (mother of Jesus) through whom the male mystic gives birth to the Child of his soul (*walad ma'nawi*) is viewed as a "prototype" of the feminine exemplified by the male mystic (Corbin 1958:136; 263-4 n. 135). The highly revered figure of Mary, after whom the nineteenth chapter of the Qur'an is named, is among exceptional women whose positive image (her virgin birth, piety, etc.) can be easily culled from the archives of Islam (Sands 2006:79-109).

To understand the epistemological violence of a concept like the Creative Feminine, we must keep the dialectics of reliance-repression in mind. In this context, the feminine gender of creativity is predicated upon the appropriation of the female biological function of birthing in ways that presumes, produces, and sustains a closed masculine-same signifying economy. This appropriation necessitates the feminine's differentiation with its cultural/biological correlate, the woman. For instance, Mary's exceptionality, which is related to the miraculous virgin birth of Jesus specifically attested in the Qur'an, ensures that no woman can ever actually replicate it (Daly 1973, 1986; Warner 1976:19-24, 34-49). After all, it was God Himself who inexplicably "chose" Mary over all other women, and "purified" her (or more accurately *chose to purify her*). The Qur'an states: "Behold! The angels said, 'O Mary! God has chosen you and purified you, chosen you above the women of all nations'" (3:42). Originally related to the positive image of the mother goddess, virgin motherhood is transformed into an impossible ideal that through the ideological machinations of the male imaginary supports man's natural superiority and closeness to higher orders with its concurrent female subjection. In no way does virgin birth empower women, either as individuals or as a community. In fact Anderson argues that implied in this concept is "a devaluing of all human mothers" (Anderson 1998:133). In a similar vein Luce Irigaray asserts, "Women, traditionally cast as mothers of gods, have no God or gods of their own to fulfill their gender, whether as individuals or as a community" (Irigaray 1993:81). One can even argue that, on its own and decontextualized, this Qur'anic verse about Mary implies the impurity of all women as well as Mary prior to her purification.

Another example of the omission of the feminine could be found in what is excluded by the assumed heteronormativity of Ibn Arabi's statement, that woman offers the most intense and perfect contemplation of God. Can this statement equally apply to

women as well as men? That is, can a woman also contemplate God in another woman? The answer is no, because the very possibility of the most perfect contemplation of God in woman asserted by Ibn Arabi is predicated upon the male gender of the contemplator. Indeed the preservation and currency enjoyed by such patronizing statements are contingent upon the male gender of the Muslim sages to whom they are attributed. We can only imagine the scandalized reactions to this statement had it been uttered by a female saint, like Rabia. As pointed out by Maria Massi Dakake, "a more feminine, mystical view of God does not always entail an active role for human females in the worldly institution of a mystical tradition" (Dakake 2006:132). However, in a contradictory conclusion Dakake does not view the rejection of submitting to men through the compulsory institution of marriage by Muslim female mystics as subversive: "[the female mystic's] harshness and detachment toward earthly creatures and human men was not necessarily a denial or rejection of their feminine virtue or even of the important Islamic institution of marriage (as much as it may have seemed so on the outside), but rather a determination to direct all of their feminine devotion and love toward the only "Spouse" worthy of it—the Divine, Himself" (Dakake 2006:151). The flaw of Ibn Arabi's statement becomes more evident when we consider the compulsory heteronormativity of this statement (not to mention that for example the contemplation of that young Persian woman's beauty, which reportedly opened up all the esoteric knowledge for Ibn Arabi, did absolutely nothing for her). In rare and exceptional cases the title of "honorary man" may be awarded to a woman, but she remains an embodied and gendered female subject. A good analogy of this is honorary degrees awarded to certain individuals of distinction by academic institutions. An honorary law degree, for example, does not entitle the recipient to practice law, yet the awarding institution benefits by association with that individual. Whether noted by the (invariably male) pre-modern Sufi authorities or their modernist Muslim interlocutors (like Nasr), Ibn Arabi's statement, or cases of exceptional women from the archives of Islam, reveal more about the structurations of the self-referential masculine imaginary than about human-divine relationship. Grace Jantzen's words are particularly relevant here: "… the ideal of the rational, passionless man, becoming god-like in mastery and knowledge and exerting his dominance over all (m)others is a fantasy that tells us more about male psychosexual development than about godliness" (Jantzen 1999:42-3).

A relevant analytical concept for understanding the simultaneous reliance upon and repression of the feminine built into such truth-claims as the one attributed to Ibn

Arabi—and uncritically repeated by modern thinkers—is the psychoanalytical concept of *disavowal* that Žižek brings into his discussion. In its Lacanian sense, which includes both a recognition and a denial, disavowal is a recognition of the hermeneutical efficacy of the feminine for advancement of a masculine order (Evans 1996:43-4). It is also a differentiation and denial of its link to the biological woman through abstraction and idealization. There is no ignorance of exceptional women or "ordinary" ones. However, woman is not integrated into the archives of Islam as a woman. After all, the architects and guardians of Islam's archives are all men, and most importantly, the paternal Law is the governing feature of the archive of Islam. This is true about all monotheistic religions where their overwhelmingly androcentric cultural context as well their monotheistic structure reinforce a phallocentric orientation (Tourage 2007:225). It is certainly true about the "extreme masculine monotheism" of Islam, as Žižek puts it (Žižek 2009:unpaginated). Following Claude Lévi-Strauss we know that the paternal Law is not a piece of legislation but the fundamental principle through which social existence becomes possible and around which all social relations, ranging from kinship to communication and language itself, are organized. Therefore woman is inscribed into the archives of Islam as a sign, not as a woman. She is an object of exchange devoid of intrinsic value except when signified and re-circulated within the masculine imaginary (synonymous with the paternal Law), which structures the archives of Islam (Levi-Strauss 1969). In this context the narcissistic operations of the masculine-same imaginary are best understood as a "phallo-logic" through which the feminine is reproduced as the "phallic-opposite," and viewed simply as a "receptacle, castrated hole" (Gallop 1988:94, 96). To use Butler's words, the woman becomes the site of "masculine self-elaboration" (Butler 1990:56). This is a position which according to Nasr is a divinely ordained destiny for women: "To accept one's destiny as the wife and mother who is of necessity concerned with daily problems, and to submit oneself to one's social position and duties with the awareness that this is in reality submitting oneself to the Divine Will have led many Muslim women to an intensely contemplative inner life amidst, and integrated into, the type of active life imposed upon her by the hands of destiny" (Nasr 1988:73).

Another example often thrown into discussions is the influential concept of "the Universal Perfect Man" (*al-insan al-kamil*) formulated by Ibn Arabi. Michel Chodkiewicz explains that the perfection of the Perfect Man, which properly speaking is possessed only by Prophet Muhammad, is nevertheless the ultimate goal of all spiritual life (Murata

1992:44). The importance of this concept for influencing Islam's mystical discourse can be gauged from Sachiko Murata's observation that the Universal Perfect Man is the androgynous transcendental archetype which has dominated the "sapiential" tradition down to modern times (Murata 1992:44). Nasr identifies this platonic notion of androgynous origin in which the chaos of the gendered subjectivities is collapsed into a wholeness and plenary coexistence (the yet-to-be-differentiated primordial state) as "the paradisal state" (Nasr 1987:48-9, 52). However, in the discourse of the Sufis, the recurrent denaturalized deployments of this concept signify only the masculine, overlooking the complexity of gendered and embodied subjectivities (Tourage 2007:165-181). This mirrors the same denaturalization of androgyny formulated by Mircea Eliade as "a transcendental archetype … a symbolic restoration of Chaos … the undifferentiated unity that preceded the Creation" (Eliade 1987:277; Eliade 1965:110-12). Even the "perennialists" themselves admit its absurdity, though in the same breath they continue to defend its tenuous validity. For example, Frithjof Schuon calls the idea that a saintly woman is truly a man "absurd in itself, but defensible." He continues, "… for a woman, submission to man—not to no matter what man—is a secondary form of human submission to God. It is so because the sexes, as such, manifest an ontological relationship, and thus an existential logic which the spirit may transcend inwardly but cannot abolish outwardly" (Schuon 1981:142-3).

The androgynous figure in Sufism does not belong to Islam's prehistory, in fact it has a traceable literary history in the archives of Islam's tradition of love poetry. Arabic love poetry of the pre-Abbasid and pre-Islamic period invariably depicted the beloved as an identifiable female, usually mentioned by her personal name (De Bruijn 1982-:128-9). However, in later developments, particularly in Persian lyrical poetry, the beloved gradually became idealized as a handsome premature male in whose beauty God could be contemplated, or to use a technical term from Sufism, "witnessed" (Schimmel 1975:289-91; El-Rouayheb 2005:111-136). The historicity of the concept of androgyny points to a crucial function of the archive, its *power of consignation* that not only records but also controls the instruments of recording and consequently produces what is to be recorded. Jacques Derrida calls this the "archontic" power of the archive, the power that structures the ways in which recordings are to be classified, disseminated, and lived (Derrida 1996:3).[1] The historicity of androgyny—the implicit cultural history of its received meanings and mechanism of archiving it in the explicit history of Islam—is bracketed when it is transformed from a contingent phenomenon into an originary

inevitability. The ideological effects of asserting a paradisal state of an ultimate androgynous being amount to the privileging of a mythical and undeterminable reference point as the arbiter of the problematics of embodied and gendered subjectivities. Thus, the "Perfect Universal Androgynous Man" is really "a poetic fiction," or "the fiction of the original plenitude," (MacLeod 1998:28; Weil 1992:9-11, 17-21) produced, classified, and disseminated through the archontic operations of the masculine imaginary. Surely sediments of empirical influences from Greek philosophical tradition and the strict gender segregation in Muslim societies contributed to the (always male) mystic's contemplation of the beauty in a handsome youth. However, a greater contributing factor to this practice—and to gender segregation for that matter—was the phallic-same structuration of the masculine imaginary. Perhaps the Androgynous Universal Perfect Man, like the Creative Feminine, is a useful feature of Islam's symbolic history that may point to complementary possibilities between genders (especially that *al-insān al-kāmil* is grammatically a gender neutral term in Arabic). However, because of the self-aggrandizing operations of the masculine self-same imaginary they turn out to be no more than failed utopian narratives at best.

Repressed Feminine Origins of Islam

Traces of the repressed feminine origins of Islam can be recovered from its archives if we read against the grain. But the feminine seems to always affirm and reflect the signifying power of the masculine subject as the universal organizing principle of cultural ideals and values. The Masculine position structures all linguistic and representational forms of meaning production. It is not hard to deconstruct the masculinity and divine association constructed through the masculine imaginary, many Muslim women have already done that. It is more crucial to demonstrate, with a mind to change, the existing patriarchal androcentric symbolic framework in which the ideal of masculinity is made to be the measure of all human aspirations. One example is Khadija who put her considerable financial fortune at Muhammad's disposal and became the first and most decisive believer at a time when Muhammad himself was in so much doubt that he reportedly contemplated throwing himself off the mountain top—he was midway on the mountain when Gabriel stopped him (Ibn Ishaq 1955:106). She is the symbolic maternal figure who affirms and reflects back to Muhammad the authenticity of his call as a divinely revealed message. Another example is Hagar. It is difficult to see the

significance of Hassan's representation of Hagar as an extraordinary woman on her own. Hagar may have "mothered a civilization," as Hassan rightly argues. But her "pioneering" status is highly problematic considering that her reproductive function as a mother is already sanctioned by the paternal Law as a natural necessity in ways that always support and strengthen the paternal position of Abraham. Thus, when searching for the repressed feminine origins of Islam we do not uncover woman as woman, a subject reflecting on her own being and desire, but woman as always already a sign inscribed by the paternal Law that characterizes the archive. As Toril Moi reminds us, even studying the images produced by women is "equivalent to studying false images of women" (Moi 1985:44). The myths and stories are retrieved from the archives of Islam with nostalgia, but rarely in ways that change the male-centered social order prefigured by these myths and stories.

The point of these examples is that there is no prehistoric unrepressed feminine that one can recover or return to. Žižek correctly asserts that in the context of Islamic tradition woman is "an ontological scandal, her public exposure is an affront to God" (Žižek 2009:unpaginated). However, the popularized myth of the eternal virgins of paradise noted by Žižek as the fantasmatic foundation of this male-controlled universe is more of a recent phenomenon. As Nerina Rustamji has shown, the virginity of the *houris* of paradise ("wide-eyed maidens," mentioned four times in the Qur'an 44:54, 52:20, 55:72, 56:22)–was crystallized in the twentieth century popular Arabic eschatological pamphlets (Rustamji 2007:79-92). What is more relevant is the aversion of (conservative) Muslims to any public exposure of women. All traditional scholars equate a woman's voice with her genitals (*aura*) and opine that a woman's voice is not permitted to be heard by strange men, even if she is reciting the Qur'an and her voice is heard from behind a screen or through a recording (Rabbani nd:unpaginated). This equation of women's voice with genitals, which many neo-conservative Muslims go to great length to explain, is a "powerful conjoint mythology of the look and the sexual organ," as Bouhdiba puts it. He explains that this equation is "Not only because the sweet words coming from her mouth must be heard only by her husband and master, but because the voice may create a disturbance and set in train the cycle of *zina* [illicit sexual intercourse]." He continues: "When one knocks at the door of a house and there is no man or little boy or little girl to answer 'Who is there?', woman must never speak: she must be content with clapping her hands" (Bouhdiba 1974:30-42). It is not simply the presence of the woman or her voice that is an affront, because there is no intrinsic

significance in a voice or presence – as noted earlier, woman is a sign endowed with significance only to be the site of masculine self-elaboration. However, a woman is an embodied and gendered subject of social and historical contexts, which means her body (or in this case at least, her genitals precisely) has a major epistemological role both as a site and as a sign of subjectivity (Cooey 1994). The body is merely a sign whose signification is determined by the *ideological* assumptions of a given society; it is signified by the culture and in turn signifies the culture. No body means anything outside of the culture, and no culture can be formed without body: "There is no body without culture as there is no culture without body" (Wolfson 1995:79). Furthermore, as Howard Eilberg-Schwartz reminds us, "When people relate to the discrete organs of their bodies, they are not just relating to themselves but to symbols of their culture" (Eilberg-Schwartz 1992:12). This means that many symbols of the culture too – and for the purposes of this paper, many symbols of the archives of Islam – are also linked to discrete organs of the body. To put a spin on Bouhdiba's phrase, can we then not see a woman's body as powerful conjoint mythologies of the archives of Islam and the sexual organ? Or in an entirely Zizekian fashion, instead of Žižek's Kantian caveat of an "ontological crack in the universe," (Žižek 1993:45) wouldn't it be more accurate to view woman's genitals as the ontological crack in the purported consistency of the male self-same universe? It follows that a positive answer to these questions necessitates the elimination of the feminine's public appearance except when self-servingly she is found useful for upholding masculine supremacy.

Here we should ask: In what ways the woman's voice, or more accurately her genitals, are an affront to Islam's masculinist order? Žižek hints that the answer could be found in the trauma of castration. Whereas Freud formulated castration as the discovery that the maternal body is marked by lack of the penis (Freud 1977:351-7), in its Lacanian reformulation castration is related to the symbolic lack of an imaginary object, i.e. the imaginary phallus (Lacan 1966:822). Those Muslim men who equate a woman's voice with her genitals are inadvertently alluding to a very important phenomenon: as a site of masculine self-elaboration a woman('s genitals) is a reminder of the lack. Needless to say, this is a symbolic lack, just as the woman, mother or feminine too are not biological givens but symbolic positions (sexual differences are not so much matters of biology as they are matters of signification). This allows me to use these designations interchangeably, leaving them intentionally vague (and as well the terms men, male and masculine) for theoretical purposes (Grosz 1995:11). Therefore it

is not that the woman simply has no penis, but that her presence is a reminder that no one *has* the phallus. This means no one has the power to signify, because the power to signify or be the originator of meaning entails having the phallus – or as Žižek has it, to be a guarantor of truth. Lacan explains that "having" the (hidden) phallus is a masculine position, which is often confused with having the penis (Lacan 1966:693-5). The phallus is not the penis. But in an androcentric order like patriarchal Muslim cultures the penis is taken as the compulsory referent for the non-objectifiable phallus as its privileged signifier and in the process upholding the superiority of the masculine in all arrangements of signification (Tourage 2011). In this context the presence of the woman (her voice, body, genitals, even the sound of her high heels[2]) is a reminder of the radical break, the unbridgeable gap between the privileged signifier, the phallus, and the signified.

The Islamists require the compulsory veiling of women not so much for guarding public sexual morality as they claim, but to cover up the lack of the phallus, that essential loss that we can articulate as castration. The uncontrolled presence of the feminine (in public, in arts and literature, etc.) is a powerful reminder of castration, something that upsets the Islamists' claim of directly channelling the divine will; or as Žižek puts it, their "psycho-delirious-incestuous reassertion of religion as direct insight into the divine Real" (Žižek 2009:34). Consequently, her elimination sustains the illusion that there is something substantial beneath the veil. Žižek observes: "Woman is a threat because she stands for the 'undecidability' of truth, for a succession of veils beneath which there is no ultimate hidden core; by veiling her, we create the illusion that there is, beneath the veil, the feminine Truth" (Žižek 2009:unpaginated). An inverted obfuscation of this castration anxiety is patronizingly offered by the "perennialists" who argue that woman must be veiled, because she *does* represent the feminine truth for men so they alone (with exceptions made for "exceptional" women who are admitted as honorary men, of course) can reassert exclusive spiritual powers and access to truth: "… direct and naked truth is at once too precious and too dangerous, it intoxicates and kills, and it runs the risk of being profaned and inciting revolt; it is like wine, which must be sealed and which in fact Islam prohibits, or like woman, who must be covered and whom in fact Islam veils" (Schuon 2006:2). Ultimately what the veil covers up is the feminine's non-existence, which in Lacanian terms means taking away the feminine's power to signify, to become what is variously translated as "not all" (Lacan 1985:144) or "not whole" (Lacan 1998:73). Therefore Lacan maintains: "there is no such thing as *The* woman,

where the definite article stands for the universal" (Lacan 1985:144). It is by her non-existence that the woman affirms the oneness of the phallus as the privileged signifier and reflects its signifying power. This is the divergent position of "being the phallus," a feminine position reflecting the power of the phallus as the privileged signifier in contradistinction to the masculine position of "having the phallus" (Lacan 1966:693-5). It is in this sense that the woman, Khadija for example, affirms the truth of the message received by Muhammad. Or as Žižek puts it, she becomes the Lacanian "big Other" who must believe in Muhammad first in order for him to believe his own claim; women believe but men believe those who believe in them (Žižek 2009:unpaginated). Like a child's symbolic encounter with the maternal lack (after seeing the mother as the big Other who sanctioned and answered child's cry), exposing the big Other, the guarantor of truth, as non-existence, or discovering that the lack and incompleteness in the big Other amounts to the castration complex.

Female appearance is therefore an outrageous excess, disturbing and provocative, a "monstration" (disclosure, exposure). She must be eliminated from the public, making the feminine the secret repressed history of Islam, its "fantasmatic secret history" as Žižek sees it. Fantasmatic secret history is discernible through the traces of traumatic fantasies that are transmitted "between the lines" through lack and distortion of explicit history, effectively sustaining the explicit mythical narrative of Islam's "symbolic history" (Žižek 2009:unpaginated). It is by identifying with the secret history, not by simply identifying with its explicit symbolic tradition, that full membership of the community, in this case as male members, is established. In private they may be submissive to women, but all male members of the community must renounce the feminine and at least appear to have done so in public, as if manhood can only be certified by public female degradation.[3] The renowned 13th century Persian mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi (and incidentally the bestselling poet of the 1990's in the United States) points out to men: "Though outwardly it may appear as if you have conquered the woman / Inwardly you desire her and you are (indeed) conquered (by her)" (Rumi 1988:I.2431; Mojaddedi 2004:150). He writes that a man might be a great hero in battlefield, but "His wife still keeps him bound in slavery." Even Prophet Muhammad who had the whole world under his command would still come to Aisha, his favourite wife, and submissively say: "Speak to me, o Readhead one [a nickname of Aisha]" (Rumi 1988:1.2428). The cases of the exceptional females (traces of whom cannot be so easily eliminated from the archives of Islam) are dealt with through disavowal, which

occasions the denial of a meaningful link between them and the embodied and gendered flesh and blood women by abstracting them as idealized honorary men. This way, the feminine, or more precisely the fantasy of the feminine as the secret repressed history of Islam, continues to be re-circulated within the masculine imaginary and archives of Islam in ways that uphold its officially acknowledged symbolic history. Hence, the feminine continues to be the masculine imaginary's constitutive yet disavowed foundation, highlighting masculine supremacy while warding off Muslim men's castration anxiety.

Castration and/or lack signals the deferral of closure in the process of signification, a preposition that collides with the religious claims of certainty, propagated by the Islamists. Žižek's often repeated insight into the workings of belief is relevant here. He observes that those who are often referred to as "religious fundamentalists" are not true believers, when they reduce belief to positive knowledge, they are in fact a threat to authentic belief: "For them religious statements and scientific statements belong to the same modality" (Žižek 2009:32). It is no surprise that for many of them emphasis on knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge, takes precedent over belief. Along with Žižek we can point to the thousands of books and websites and pamphlets that go to great pain to demonstrate the latest scientific advances confirming the insights and injunctions of the Qur'an. Ideally belief is a subjectively sufficient religious doctrine in no need of necessary proof or external verifier (Lopez 1998:21). This is true about Islamic belief where belief has more to do with bearing witness, that is, actively recognizing and responding in submission to God, than with holding specific knowledge of God and revelations or the angels (Murata and Chittick 1994:37-8). In fact in the Qur'an the Arabic term *iman*, often translated as "belief" or "peace" and "security," is ideally expressed in doing pious deeds, like charity (Adang 2001-2006:1.218-26). It is no coincidence that many Muslim Islamists are engineers (like Bin Laden) and physicians (Al-Qaida's second in command al-Zawahiri), or many are internet savvy imams, rejecting philosophy, logic, theology and literature that previously informed the wholesome cosmopolitan world of Islamic education. Whereas inaccessibility of the content of belief (signalled by the irreducible lack, the non-objectifiable hidden phallus, non-existence of the big Other) is meant to evoke a sense of awe and wonder at the openness of meaning production, and upon which a whole series of creative dynamic processes (like Sufism, theology and philosophy), as well as the entire vulnerabilities of human beings are to be built, for the Islamists scientific knowledge produces certainties. The result is the closure of the process of meaning production, delusional claims of self-

grounding coherence and completion of subjectivities, alienating the subject from developmental possibilities, and of course the repression of the feminine and the culmination of all these in dead(ly) certainties. "Suturing," a concept borrowed from cinema theory, which suggests an imaginary surmounting of the lack is an apt characterization of this attempt at closure (Silverman 1983: 194-236).

Concluding Remarks

The goal of this paper is to follow Žižek's insight that the feminine is the repressed origin of Islam. Therefore I will not give a survey of Muslim women's (and men's) efforts challenging the hegemony of masculine imaginary, resisting it overtly or through acts that are configured as devotion, but in reality are refigured as dissent (Mahmood 2004). Nor will I attempt to offer solutions beyond what has already been offered by many women themselves. For example to replace the male imaginary and the masculine symbolic of Lacanian psycholinguistics in which women are locked, Anderson has suggested a "philosophical imaginary" through which the symbolic itself could be questioned, and women question their beliefs and create philosophies of their own instead of being Kantian or Lacanian, or even Irigarayans (Anderson 1998). To do so one might run the risk of instantiating another case of an academic, bourgeois, imperialist masculine imaginary at work, either pretending to be a "theoretical impersonator," that is a double talking feminist man, or in the fashion of an eighteenth century orientalist consigning the male's/west's fetishistic fantasies of the suppressed feminine to the Muslim other (Tyler 2003:81, 148). In his typical role of only analyzing the problem Žižek too does not offer a solution. He does points out that "the key element of the genealogy of Islam" is the passage of the woman as the only verifier of the truth to the woman who by her nature lacks reason and faith, provokes, disturbs and threatens the masculine order through her excessive monstration. What are the ways in which the masculine imaginary could be unsettled? Žižek points out that we cannot simply return to the repressed feminine origins of Islam and "renovate" it in its feminist aspect or find the "good" feminist Islam as opposed to the "bad" Islam that oppresses women. The reason is that oppression oppresses the feminine as well as its own origins in line with the phallic-same narcissistic structurations of masculine imaginary/paternal law. Furthermore, no universal solution or even a cluster of solutions could exhaust the range of possible options, because just as the feminine (as the subject of the masculine

imaginary) is not a stable and self-evident category, the masculine imaginary too is not a permanent and incontestable structure. Even though the masculine imaginary cites the feminine in ways that always repeats and upholds the normative regimes of heterosexuality and male supremacy, its regulatory operations do not take a singular form. If there is no universal masculine imaginary, there cannot be a universal strategy for unsettling it either, as many theorists have argued. Nor can "patriarchy" be considered a universal structure that names the source of all and every oppression of the feminine. There are other "distinct articulations of gender asymmetry in different cultural contexts" that cannot be summed up and reduced to the notion of "patriarchy" as a universal concept (Butler 1990:35).

Keeping these considerations in mind, however, we can point to the radical unsettling that could be mounted through the masculine imaginary itself. The unsettling of the masculine imaginary cannot be achieved simply by acts of overt and explicit transgression as Žižek argues (Žižek 1994:7-8). This is because the dynamics of transgression are produced by the same discourse that they purport to subvert. Transgression ultimately serves as support of the Law. As Lacan points out, transgression is paradoxically produced by the imposed limitations of the (paternal) Law; prohibition is the necessary ingredient for transgression and "desire is the reverse of the law" (Lacan 1966:787, quoted in Evans 1996:99). Along the same lines Luce Irigaray argues that subversion must start by going "back through the masculine imaginary to interpret the way it has reduced [women] to silence, to muteness or mimicry" (Irigaray 1985:164). One strategy put forth is excessive literal conformity to the ideological maneuverings of masculine imaginary. Irigaray formulates this transgressive over-signification as "mimesis," which for her means "overmiming" as a disruptive imitation. She argues for mimesis as a way to subvert the economy of the same through which the male subject measures every other being against himself. By deliberately assuming and overdoing a mimetic feminine role, which for Irigaray is synonymous with "hysteric", and is historically allocated to all women under patriarchy, a woman can turn subordination into affirmation (Irigaray 1985:76). Carole-Ann Tyler explains: "Characterized by irony, hyperbole, parody, italicization, pastiche, and quotations, mimicry is evidently the quintessential postmodern practice …" (Tyler 2003:23). Other theorists argue for a similar strategy, for example, through the concept of parody (Butler 1990:122, 137-49; Hutcheon 1985). Mimicry or parody work by disrupting the masculine economy of the same, demonstrating the ways it constructs women as always the essentially

inconsequential other of the same. The disruptive possibilities of miming or parody lie in the production of an awareness of the constructed nature of femininity and its "difference" from the masculine self-same.

An example could be found in some of the writings of the Syrian born University of Arkansas feminist Muslim professor Mohja Kahf. In one provocative piece entitled "Do Women Get Dick in Heaven?" she mimetically probes the Quranic notion of *houris* and the fulfillment of sexual desires of believers in paradise. She writes that in a study circle in a mosque discussing the chapter in the Qur'an where all the sexy virgin babes are promised to men, a woman asks the Muslim male scholar present: "Men get pussy, do we get dick?" The Imam immediately answers: "Any woman who wants such a thing is not likely to make it to paradise." The follow up question remains unanswered: "What about the verse that says 'round about, boys of eternal youth shall serve them?" (Qur'an 76:19) Another example could be found from Michael Muhammad Knight's controversial book *Taqwacore*, where playing on the same theme of virginal sex in paradise a female character named Rabeya describes her paradise as: "Big black dicks that never go soft, even after blowing their milk-honey Kauthar … line 'em up and spread me – oh wait, sorry – that is not in my nature. I meant 'cut off my labes and give me 72 sons so I can cook them macaroni with halal cheese" (Knight 2004:132). These examples are subversive of the masculine imaginary by showing the artificiality of the phallus as a signifier, that is, the phallus being a kind of "artificial" supplement, a "prosthetic," or "dildo" propping up the falsity of males' claim "to have" the phallus (Žižek 1997:136). It should be noted that these examples do stage the heterosexual desire for the penis and in a way men's fantasies, but Anderson would agree that it is necessary to meet the patriarchal symbolic on its own turf: "Before it is possible to disrupt the social-symbolic order of patriarchy, women have no choice but to take on patriarchal symbols and language in order to be understood as dissenting from within dominant accounts of reality" (Anderson 1998:226).

Aside from these mimetic takes on familiar subjects, if we take it quite literally we can correctly assume that the Universal Perfect Man must have both male and female genitals! Then, wouldn't the "unauthorized" body of a hermaphrodite (which has the reproductive organ tissues of both sexes) best exemplify the physical manifestation of the coincidence of the two sexes in the Universal Perfect Man? The negative answer to this question reveals the paradoxical point that the primary function of the transcendental androgyne (purported to be the restoration of a prehistoric undifferentiated unity of the

sexes) is contingent upon the "chaos" of gendered and embodied subjects remaining unresolved. To take a "metaphysical"[4] concept like the Universal Perfect Man more literally than it is prepared to take itself reveals the hidden necessity of its reliance upon that which it claims to overcome, i.e., its need for the unresolved "chaos" to remain unresolvable so that the male can be authorized as *the* ontologically self-sufficient gender. The same hidden necessity conceals the Creative Feminine's reliance for its self-authorization on projecting all material and constraining aspects onto the inessential female other. Therefore, the indeterminacy of sexed and gendered subjectivities cannot be universally positioned and perfectly fixed through metaphysical concepts such as the Universal Perfect Man. Nor can the process of meaning production come to an end through suturing, which, to borrow from Žižek, enables the self-referential masculinist imaginary (characterizing both the Islamists' and traditionalists/perennialists' thinking) to (mis)perceive itself as a self-enclosed totality of representation (Žižek 2012:621).

Hence, what is hidden in these metaphysical concepts is not simply relations of mutual dependence or external opposition between these concepts and their cultural/biological corollary. The hidden content, that disavowed repressed fantasmatic secret history of Islam, is best described as a Foucauldian relation of "immanence," wherein the feminine/woman is always "inside" power, never in a position of exteriority (Foucault 1978:94, 95). It is this relation of immanence that renders direct acts of transgression of the paternal law non-threatening because such transgressions support the installation of the law. The subversive force of this hidden content is found in the dependence of a concept like androgyny on the uncontrollable excess of the woman. Neither the woman in relation to the Creative Feminine or androgyny, nor the feminine apropos Islam's genesis, are secondary effects of repression, they are their very constitutive, yet disavowed, foundation. For these metaphysical concepts or the symbolic history of Islam to operate, i.e. fulfill their *symbolic* function, their founding gestures must remain unacknowledged, except, of course, if their symbolization somehow supports the primacy of the masculine. Hence, in these metaphysical concepts we do not find a road-map to a once mythical time to be arrived at again where the multiplicity of our culturally contingent and historically constructed subjectivities are magically transcended as we enter a paradisal state of wholeness; or in beholding the face of a young woman when circumambulating the Ka'ba all esoteric knowledge are suddenly revealed to us like Ibn Arabi. Rather these metaphysical concepts are indeed

the epistemological coordinates of narcissistic illusions of self-sufficient plenitude that mark the masculine imaginary.

Finally, despite the phallo-logic masculine imaginary that shapes much of Islamic religious tradition (Islamists and perennialists as two seemingly opposing camps, claiming religious and esoteric certainty respectively, are cases in point[5]), Islam remains relevant as a site of resistance against all repressions including the repression of the feminine. Religion offers paradoxical, even contradictory resources that are capable of undermining themselves or even, at times, of turning into their opposites. As Žižek in his turn to religion has shown: "God is no longer the Highest Being watching over our destiny, but a name for the radical openness, for the hope of change, for the always-to-come Otherness" (Žižek 2012:627).

Notes

I am fully aware of the epistemological underpinnings that differentiate Derrida from Žižek and his Lacanian model of analysis that is the focus of this paper. However, Derrida's insights are particularly relevant here.

[2] A reference to the banning of high heels during the Taliban era, noted by Žižek. Along the same lines, a female interviewee in the documentary "Me and the Mosque" (Nawaz 2005) notes that "brothers" in Muslim Students Association (MSA) at the University of Toronto were scandalized when during the Friday prayer "sisters' only swimming" times were publicly announced.

[3] Public in this case is decidedly constructed as a masculine space, backed by Islamic tradition that generally does not require women to attend communal prayer in the mosque. In some Muslim countries, like Pakistan, women do not attend the mosque. The masculine nature of the public space also goes a long way to explain the pervasive street sexual harassment of women. Even veiled women in countries like Egypt are not immune to public sexual harassment from men. A 2008 survey by the Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights (ECWR) reported: "62 percent of Egyptian men reported perpetrating harassment, while 83 percent of Egyptian women reported having been sexual harassed. Nearly half of women said the abuse occurred daily … 98 percent of foreign women had been harassed." Quoted in Kearl 2010:80.

[4] I am using the term "metaphysics" in its pejorative sense formulated by Jacques Derrida as "metaphysics of presence," suggesting claims of self-sufficiency in closed systems of reference with their inherent resistance to alternative perspectives. On the metaphysics of presence especially as it relates to Lacanian theory, see Derrida 1980:505–510.

[5] That these two seemingly opposing camps are "the two sides of the same coin" is observed by Hamid Dabashi who writes: "A dialectics of reciprocity thus emerges between political atrocities that a delegitimated ideology perpetrates (Osama Bin Laden) and the pathological compensations that it occasions for the misplaced gurus and their lucrative *spirituality* industry (Seyyed Hossein Nasr). See Dabashi 2008:213.

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