

**Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. (1997). *Disciplining the Soul and Breaking the Two Desires: Books XXII and XXIII of the Revival of the Religious Sciences* (Abdal Hakim Murad, Trans.). Islamic Texts Society. 370 pp. ISBN-10: 0946621438<sup>o</sup>**

### **Makmor Tumin<sup>1</sup>**

Knowledge on sexuality has always been kept at bay particularly in religious teachings. Even discussions on *fiqh* (jurisprudence) that are laid on the table are not detailed, and this applies across religions, particularly among the Abrahamic faiths. Since the desire for sex is difficult to be tamed, human discourses on this matter are usually thrown into two extremes. On the extreme left, the idea of celibacy and refraining from talking about it is more celebrated, whereas those on the extreme right more often than not are very open, hence opening the door for concupiscence and debauchery. Both are equally important, though the middle course should be the golden mean.

A sexual revolution which took place in the United States in the 1960's has influenced the way the world understood sexuality. Muslims should not close their eyes to this as if there is no problem in their community. Sweeping things under the rug or covering a cadaver with roses will not solve problems. In fact, the discussion on how to deal with this issue has been on the table systematically for more than 900 years.

Imam al-Ghazali's work, *Kasr al-Shahwatayn* (On Breaking the Two Desires) stood as one of the many examples. This book is part of his project to help understand how to discipline one's *nafs*. There are two main parts of our *nafs*: Gluttony and Lust. The book propagates the idea of the virtue of hunger and Gluttony as the fountain of evil.

The discussion on Gluttony is divided into five sections. In Section 1, the Imam brings the reader's attention towards how the condition of forgetfulness had led Adam and Eve to depart from Heaven to Earth. Such conditions had caused them to be tricked by the Devil to eat the forbidden fruit. Hence, eating or Gluttony is the main problem one has to observe. In this same section, he also provides

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<sup>o</sup> This book review was submitted on: 29/09/2022 and accepted for publication on: 08/12/2022.

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hadith and ethical sayings of people of the past on the subject of hunger to substantiate his claim on the cause of Adam and Eve's exile.

Understanding that one could only motivate if one only understands or believes, and that benefits shall accrue from one action, in Section 2, he presented 10 benefits of hunger. If one can understand the torment of Hellfire, by hunger, one should have the experience of enduring torments if they really practice extreme hunger.

Apart from spiritual benefits, the Imam discusses some of the worldly benefits of such practice such as keeping one's body healthy and saving money. In Section 3, the Imam proposes a very interesting idea on how one can break the problem of Gluttony. The important point the Imam presented in this section is on gradualness. It is not only quantity that matters, but also people's attitude towards food. He called this the greed of the stomach.

If there is something marvellous which can be said about this book, *Kasr al-Shahwatayn*, it would be relating to Sections 4 and 5. The Imam's intuitive insightfulness and psychological acuity are visible in every page of these two sections. His thoughts on the middle course must be associated with part of the most repeated chapter of the Quran, Surah Al-Fatihah, particularly the verse "Guide us to the Straight Path". "The Straight Path" here has to be understood as not only avoiding the extreme left and right, but also the balance that one must practice in benefitting from the virtue of hunger.

He used the metaphor of an ant in a ring to present his idea clearly. What is important is the spiritual benefit from breaking the Gluttony, not the bodily benefit. His psychological acuity or sharpness in Section 5 should make others read, more than once, the discussion in this section. Are we practicing for the sake of The Almighty God or just acts of ostentation. It is unmistakably ostentatious if we avoid food in front of others but eat lavishly in private. It is love for status if we rejoice when we are known for our mastery in breaking Gluttony.

The discussions in these two sections, after completing the three previous sections (Sections 1, 2 and 3), serve as a backbone for the subsequent three sections (Sections 6, 7, and 8). The Imam began talking about the problem of Lust or sexual desire in Section 6. The human race expanded as a result of sexual intimacy, and such encounters must take place in a family only, as he makes clear in his writing. In the same section, he makes a great case in explaining the logic of the sexualised image of Paradise in Islam. The takeaway point is one can only have the motivation to do lawful and unlawful things if one can get a glimpse of

the blissfulness and miserableness of Paradise and Hellfire. Hence, the taste of Paradise is in this world to provide motivation.

One has to decide whether to marry or not to marry, and the Imam discussed this subject in Section 7. Although most of his discussions are targeted to students of knowledge, his ideas are available to all. Our priority is to draw closer to The Almighty. If you are still young, avoid deciding to get married but focus more on seeking religious knowledge. If your desire is so, so, strong and practicing hunger is unable to tame your Lust, then the decision should be to get married.

An extra point has to be made here. In this Section, the Imam also discusses the problem of homoeroticism, an issue that is rampant today. It is difficult to imagine why it is so hard for religious preachers to discuss this subject academically, not necessarily openly, knowing the unbridled popularity of the subject and movements embracing it.

In the last section, the Imam again substantiates his case on the importance of the golden mean. Any discussion on sexuality is not meant for physical benefit but rather for spiritual attainment. In doing so, he narrated several stories and demonstrated the heroism of past figures on this subject. Undoubtedly, the heroism of Prophet Yusuf against Zulaikha is placed in the limelight, coupled with a few others with such centrality.

If I must form a single sentence which extracts the whole idea of the book, it has to be the following: Gluttony and Lust are not for us to extirpate, but ostentatiousness and love for status.

Following are some of my comments:

*Kasr al Shahwatayn* is a great book, and the extended notes provided by Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad as the translator made the book even more wonderful. One cannot understand the book without a guru. Therefore, one cannot access the knowledge by oneself, let alone share it with others without proper training.

The book is loaded with stories of the superior piety of early Muslims. While their stories on hunger resemble the character of the Prophet, their attitude on Lust, for some individuals, are quite uncalled for (obviously the Imam and Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad were aware of the gravity of this issue). In their view of the dangers of Lust, they may suggest how inadvisable marriage is. The idea is that marriage makes our love for this world stronger, and this is perhaps incoherent in Islam, thus such ideas do not prevail in our tradition.

The long-debated issue of the nature of hadith which the Imam used in the work should also merit our attention. Although all of the hadith the Imam used are used to discuss on how one could improve their character, in today's cancel culture and high demand for political correctness, it would be more strategic to use the hadith in a different tone. Instead of saying the Prophet (PBUH) said such and such in the hadith, it is safer to say that these are ethical sayings available in our tradition used by many scholars. This statement does not imply that the authenticity of the hadith used is compromised. In fact, Zakariyya al-Ansari had made it clear that there are other reasons which lead to problems regarding the *sanad* in hadith, one being the *sanad* being destroyed during the Mongol invasion.

*Kasr al-Shahwatayn* must be learned and taught, especially knowing how the impact of sexual revolution had permeated to every corner of the world. We have to counterpoint the Western dictum of sexual freedom, "Sex is natural", whilst persuasively and clearly put in our agenda, "Sex is family", and the *Kasr al-Shahwatayn* provides clear and coherent arguments and evidence on this subject.