Erotic Spirituality: Metaphorical conceptualization of Desires for the Divine in Sufi Discourse

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Abstract

The embodiment hypothesis views cognition as grounded in the body’s sensory motor experience of the physical world. Gibbs’ (2005) case study of people’s talk about desire revealed that there is a cross-cultural tendency to conceptualize abstract emotions of desire, love and lust for non-material things such as reputation, success, appreciation...etc, in terms of physical sensation of hunger. Extending the findings of this experiment the current paper intended to study the conceptualization of desire for non-physical things in a more abstract realm of human experience which is Sufism. The paper’s major goal is to explain how the conceptualization of the most abstract, untenable, and ineffable spiritual experiences is constrained by the embodied mind.

Applying the neural theory of metaphor and the embodied cognition hypothesis, the paper investigated the reasons motivating the recruitment of erotic images in the conceptualization of abstract desires for abstract things such as desire for knowledge, desire for spiritual achievement, and desire for the Divine in Al-Ghazali’s The Revival of the Sciences of Religion. The findings indicated that the bodily experience impacted the sensual and lustful corporal conceptualization of spiritual desires.

Keywords: abstract desires, conceptual metaphor, embodiment hypothesis, sexuality, Sufi discourse.
Background: Metaphorical talk of desire

To test how people physical sensation of hunger contributes to their understanding of abstract emotive experiences such as love, lust and desire Gibbs (2005, p. 84/ 85/ 86) conducted an experiment with American and Brazilian students that tested the influence of people awareness and folk knowledge about their hunger experience in shaping their understanding of more abstract emotions such as desire. Participants were presented with two ranges of questions. The first range of questions revolved around bodily sensations generated by the experience of three sorts of desires: love, lust, and desire for nonhuman things like fame, adventure and money. Participants were required to read the questions and decide about their degree of relatedness to the body symptoms accompanying the experience of hunger.

The second range of questions explored the role of people’s intuitions in judging the acceptability of certain linguistic manner of expressing desire. Participants were presented with statements like “My whole body aches for you”, “I have a strong headache for knowledge”, “My hands are itching for you”, “My knees ache for information about my ancestry”) and asked to judge whether it is an acceptable linguistic form to talk about desire in their community. Quantification of the mean ratings indicated that there is a consistency in the findings of both groups for the body and the linguistic questions concerning the three types of symptoms for the three sorts of desires. For example both groups of participants judged “I have a great appetite for money” and “I have a stomach pain for my old way of life” as sound and acceptable way of expressing varied desires. And they both agreed that expressions like “I became talkative for adventure” and “My knees swell for information about my ancestry” are not acceptable to linguistically express desire. The findings provided additional empirical support for the hypothesis that embodied experience plays crucial part in structuring people’s metaphorical understanding of abstract desires and emotions (Gibbs, 2005, p. 84/ 85/ 86).

Based on these findings this research paper attempts to explore the conceptualisation of spiritual desires for the sublime and the transcendent notably desire for God, for worshipping God, and for knowing about God in a highly abstract, ineffable, and incommunicable realm of human experience which is Sufism focusing on the book of the revival of the sciences of religion. The paper’s major goal is to explain, from the embodiment of cognition perspective, what motivates the choice of erotic sensual and corporeal domains of experience to conceptualize spiritual desires for the sublime. To my knowledge linguistic account and particularly from a cognitive semantic view to the fusion of sexuality and spirituality in Sufism is very limited. Evola (2004) studied the blending of the erotic and the Divine in mystic discourse but he did not provide an explanation of the phenomenon.

Literature review

Conceptual metaphor theory

Conceptual metaphor is defined as a set of fixed patterns of ontological and epistemic correspondences across conceptual domains where knowledge about conceptual domains and inferences are projected systematically from source to target. It consists in understanding and conceptualizing one domain of experience such as life in terms of another domain of experience such as journey (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, p. 6). “The locus of metaphor is not in language at all, but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another”
Conceptual domains represent “any coherent organization of experience” (Kövecses, 2010, p. 4). Source domains are typically more concrete and more clearly delineated concepts whereas target domains are “abstract, diffuse, and lack clear delineation; as a result, they “cry out” for metaphorical conceptualization” (Kövecses, 2010, p. 23). Understanding typically goes from the more concrete domains of experience to the more abstract ones (Kövecses, 2010, p. 9). Conceptual metaphor is considered as indispensible mechanism for abstract reasoning and one of the fundamental cognitive capacities for making sense of human experience. “Conceptual metaphor is what makes most abstract thought possible” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 120).

The embodiment of cognition hypothesis

There has been a huge body of research since the emergence of cognitive linguistics that has discussed the embodiment of cognition hypothesis: (Johnson and Lakoff, 1999 and 2003, Lakoff, 1992 and 1987, Gallese and Lakoff, 2005, Johnson, 2005, Gibbs, 2005 and 2006, Feldman, 2006, Feldman and Narayanan, 2004, Kövecses and 2010, Rohrer, 2005, Pecher and Zwaan, 2005, Grady 1999, and Coulson, 2008). These studies have maintained that abstract mental processes of the mind like language and reasoning are grounded in the in the body sensory-motor experience with the physical environment. (Gallese and Lakoff, 2005, Feldman, 2006, and Johnson, 2005) provided neural evidence (neural modeling of the brain) supporting the embodiment of cognition hypothesis. They maintain that neural circuitry originally specialized in sensory-motor functions are recruited to enable abstract reasoning and mental processes of conceptualizing abstract and concrete entities. Neuroimaging research also has indicated that brain areas involved in the processing of perceptual and motor data are also activated in higher mental activities such as conceptualization (Coulson, 2008, p. 189). The neural theory of language developed by Gallese and Lakoff (2005) suggests that Brain structures in the sensory-motor regions are utilized to express abstract concepts

The evidence emerged from the discovery that imagining doing some action and actual doing of that action make use of the same neural substrate. For example imagining moving activates the same part of the brain used in actual moving, grasping and imagining grasping use the same neural substrate. “Neural exploitation” is fundamental aspect of human cognition. It consists in the use of the brain sensory-motor mechanisms to serve higher-order mental processes (language and reasoning) alongside their original functions (Gallese and Lakoff, 2005, p. 456). Gibbs (2006, p. 447/ 448) provided psychological evidence for the embodiment hypothesis by empirical testing of the embodied understanding of metaphoric expressions containing physically impossible actions like “chewing on ideas”, “stretching for understanding”, “put your finger on the truth” and “tearing apart an argument” by studying how people form mental images of these metaphors. when a participant was presented with the phrase “put your finger on the truth” and asked to imagine its meaning she replied with the following statement “I guess being able to touch the truth is an important thing, being able to relate to it, being able to actually see that it is a physical thing and can be examined” (Gibbs, 2006, p. 447/ 448). Conceptual metaphor is the mechanism that “bridges” from abstract to concrete and makes abstract thought possible Thus, metaphorical mappings from the idea of visually seeing things to the idea of intellectually understanding (Gibbs, 2005, p. 160). Lakoff (1987, p. 280) defines “the conceptualizing capacity” as the human mind capacity of abstract reasoning. This capacity is facilitated by the ability to construe symbolic structures
which are basic-level and image-schematic concepts that correlate with preconceptual structures in daily experience. The conceptualizing capacity is also fostered by the ability to metaphorically map structures from physical domains with structures from abstract domains and also the ability to form cognitive models.

**Methodology**

Relying on the embodied mind hypothesis, in particular neural embodiment, this paper analyzes metaphorical conceptualization of desires for the Divine (God, worship, and knowledge) in Al-Ghazali’s *The Revival of the Sciences of Religion (Ihyā’ ‘ulūm ad-dīn)*. The book was written by Al-Ghazali (1058/1111). It reflects on religion (faith, worship, religious knowledge, morality, etc) from a Sufi perspective. It has been considered amongst the most read and most influential works in the Islamic and particularly Sufi literature. Al-Zabidi (1311) states: “were the books of Islam all to be lost, excepting only the *Ihyaa’*, it would suffice to replace them all”. Imam Nawawi (606) stated that “*Ihyaa’* was about to be a Qur’an” (the most read work in the Muslim world, after the Qur’an). The choice of the book is completely random. I read the book a year ago (2014) and when I read the experiment about the conceptualization of desire for non-material things via aspects of the bodily experience, it raised my curiosity to investigate the conceptualization of abstract desires especially desire for the sublime in this Sufi work and I decided that it could be a topic of research. The paper analyzed the entire book available on Al-Ghazali’s website. Metaphors describing desire for three major elements: union with God, worshipping God, and knowing about God, are compiled and displayed in a tabular format specifying their names, their target and source domains, and linguistic expressions exemplifying them.

To guarantee accuracy and objectivity of analysis the study relied on MIP model of metaphor identification. It is based on four procedures. The first procedure consists in entire reading of the text and establishing an understanding of the meaning. The second procedure concerns the division of the text/discourse into lexical units. The third procedure requires: a) establishing the meaning of each lexical unit in context by taking into account preceding and following units, b) determining if the lexical unit has a basic current-contemporary sense other than the one utilized in the current context. Basic sense tends to be concrete (related to perception of the five senses), associated with the body actions, more precise (opposed to vague), and historically older. (c) If the lexical unit has a more basic sense different with its meaning in the current context, decision should be taken regarding whether the context meaning contrasts the basic meaning and whether it can be interpreted in the light of it. Finally, the fourth procedure consists in marking the lexical unit as metaphorical after comparing its meaning with the basic meaning (Erlbaum Associates (Pragglejaz Group), 2009, p. 3).

**Corpus analysis**

Corpus analysis has indicated that the conceptual metaphor GOD IS A BELOVED pervades the conceptualisations of yearning for the Sublime in the revival of the sciences of religion. The analysis yielded three types of interrelated desires; desire for union with God, desire for knowing about him, and desire for worshipping him. The three desires revolve around one centre which is the beloved God and they give the same sort of pleasure to the mureed.
Gnostics have, in their reflection and munajaat of God, pleasures that they would not accept to exchange these pleasures of paradise even with a paradise given to them in the worldly life. This pleasure of (munajaat), despite being a complete pleasure, is incomparable to the pleasure of meeting (God) and looking at (him) in the same way that the pleasure of imagining the beloved is incomparable to viewing him, the pleasure of smelling nice odours is incomparable to tasting them, and the pleasure of mere hand touching is incomparable to the pleasure of sexual intercourse. Pointing out to the big disparity between the two pleasures cannot be done except with an example. So we say the pleasure of looking at the beauty of the beloved because the pleasure of looking at

heightened to the extent that the first state of pleasure is nothing compared to it. In this way you must understand the difference between the pleasure of looking at (God) to the pleasure of knowing (him). The fine veil symbolizes the body, being preoccupied with the body together with the scorpions and the wasps symbolizes lusts such as hunger, thirst, anger, worry, distress that are oppressing man. The weakness of love and lust symbolizes the limitation of the soul and the insufficiency of its yearning to heaven because of its preoccupation with the lowest matters. It is similar to the inability of a child to recognize the pleasure of leadership turning to play with a bird. Even if the knowledge of the Gnostics in worldly life is strong they cannot be free from these worries and it is not possible to imagine them free from them (my translation).

Conceptual projection from the source domain of the experience of erotic love to the target domain of desire for the unification with God has yielded rich metaphorical entailments. Kövecses (2010, p. 122) defines metaphorical entailments as the “rich additional knowledge about a source mapped onto a target”. For example in POLITICS IS WAR metaphor knowledge such as war heroes can be added to structure political debate or argument as producing war heroes (politicians).

- The relationship between the mureed and God is a passionate love (ishk) relationship.
- God is the beloved.
- The mureed is the lover.
- Intensive yearning for God is lustful and passionate longing for a beloved.
- Rejoicing the presence in intimacy with God without fearing seclusion from him is experiencing the pleasure of being in an intimate presence with the beloved.
- Union with God is sexual union of two lovers.
- The pleasure (ladhdha) of being with God, looking at him, and union with him is the sensual pleasure of looking at a beloved and having sex with him.
- Desire for union with God is desire for sexual intercourse.
- Lustful desires (hunger, thirst, anger, and weakness in lust and love) that worry the heart of a mureed and prevent him from absolute presence with God is Physical obstacles that covers the body of the beloved preventing the lover from perfect viewing of his beloved.
- Obstacles (the body) that prevent the mureed from absolute rejoicing with God is a dress that covers the body of the beloved denying the lover strong and perfect pleasure of the sexual intercourse with his beloved.
- Separation from God is a separation from a beloved.
- Feeling jealousy toward God is feeling jealousy toward a beloved
- Hiding the secret of the Divine love is hiding the secret of a love relationship.
- Enduring hardship for the sake of God is enduring hardship for a beloved.
- The spiritual quest for the Divine is a journey to pursuit the beloved.
- Persevering in worship is preparing the self to meet a beloved in the best state.

Alghazali resorted to analogical reasoning in describing desires for the Divine by comparing the God-devotee relationship to a lover-beloved relationship. The description of the relationship with God relied on typical terminology and imageries of a passionate love relationship. Al-Ghazali argues that it is extremely unfair to call this kind of love even ishk (strong passionate love) claiming that the term is not sufficient to describe the ultimate and extreme form of passion a Sufi lover feels towards God.
In the same way that desire for God is conceptualized as a passionate love (ishk) and
passionate yearning for having sexual pleasure with a beloved so are knowledge and worship
conceptualized as experiencing pleasure (iltidhedh) with the beloved. Knowledge also is
conceptualized as pleasurable (al-‘ilm ladhidh) but not the pleasure of tasting food. The
meaning clearly alludes to rejoicing sexual pleasures. Knowledge is restricted to knowing
Allah, his attributes, his deeds, and the meaning of meeting him, looking at his face, and being
close to him. Al-Ghazali considers these themes as the focal concern of the science of mystic
unveiling (‘ulum al-mukashafa) which he deems as the most elevated and the noblest type of
sciences. He regards this science as the end of all sciences. For him knowledge is a necessary
condition for love. Love is not possible with someone unknown. The pleasure of knowing
God is conceptualized as the pleasure of looking at the body of a beloved. The pleasure of a
lover looking at his beloved in darkness from a distance or from behind a fine veil is weaker
than the pleasure of a lover who looks at the body of his beloved directly in full lightening
condition and from a near distance. The clearer and the nearer the image of the body the more
heightened the excitement and the pleasure. So with more knowledge the image of God is
more clarified and the pleasure is heightened. Less knowledge gives only weak pleasure.

The pleasure of knowing God is deemed nothing compared to the great pleasure of
meeting and union with him. The pleasure of meeting and union is equated with the pleasure
of having sexual intercourse. Sexual intercourse is viewed as generating greater excitement
compared to mere touch of hands, or looking from a distance to a beloved without coming
into contact with him. Yet the pleasure of knowledge continues in paradise in a state of ever-
growing intensity. Since God is infinite, knowledge keeps increasing infinitely and with more
knowledge the pleasure is continuously heightening.

Desire for ritual activities like prayer such as night prayer and God remembrance
dhikr is conceptualized as intensive yearning for intimate presence and talk with a beloved
in private, like the pleasure of a private and intimate meeting between a lover and his beloved.
The lover enjoys private and intimate presence with his beloved in seclusion even if his
beloved is covered from him by a veil preventing the lover from seeing him. The mere
knowledge that the beloved is there without being seen is sufficient to give pleasure. Intimate
talk with him even if it is a one way talk (the beloved keeps silent and does not participate) is
pleasurable. Munajat (speaking in private, fervent prayer, inner monologue with God) is
viewed as an intimate monologue with a beloved that the lover finds very pleasurable and
passionately longs for. The lover abandons everything for entering into seclusion with his
beloved God. The state of ‘uns’ (enjoying being with the beloved) in worldly life is equated
with an ill, fearful, or suffering lover whose suffering and pains deprive him from completely
rejoicing with his beloved, he finds some pleasure but not a complete pleasure. Worldly life
presents many obstacles for the mureed that prevent him from permanent presence and
spiritual seclusion with his beloved (God) and from achieving ultimate pleasure. In paradise
the pleasure of ‘uns’ will be heightened as the mureed will enjoy being with his beloved
without fearing separation from him. The pleasure of yearning for God is a supreme growing
pleasure to the infinite.

The conceptualization of these abstract desires for the sublime clearly utilizes erotic
terms and sensual imageries pertaining to passionate lustful love experience where the lover
manifests lustful desire for the lover. Al-Ghazali strongly advocates the existence of this kind of passionate love that he calls ‘ishk’ (excessive love) between God and the murid:

Perhaps you might say how can passionate love (ishk) be possible with Allah (to believe that) it is provoked by samaa’. So know that whoever knows Allah inevitably would love him and anyone whose knowledge about Allah is confirmed his love is ascertained. Love that is ascertained is called (ishk). ‘Ishk’ has no sense other than an ascertained extreme love (Al-Ghazali, vol. 2, p. 278) (my translation).

Despite this strong assertion, he strongly rejects any erotic interpretation that could be aroused in minds from the sensual terminology such as ‘ishk’, longing, ‘uns’ (presence in intimacy with Allah), the pleasure of munajat, and union employed to conceptualize the relationship with God:

Yes anyone who suffers from deficiency (mental deficiency) approximate to the deficiency of a beast might not understand from the term ‘ishk’ other thing than demanding (sexual) reunion that is perceived as a contact between apparent bodies for having sexual pleasure. Terms like ‘ishk’, longing, union, and ‘uns’ should be avoided with such beast. These terms and meanings should be avoided with him the same way as narcissus and basil are avoided with a beast allowing him only grass… terms must be used with Allah only when they do not illusively evoke meanings that God must be sanctified from (viewing him with) these meanings (in mind) (Al-Ghazali, vol. 2, p. 278) (my translation).

He insists that the pleasure of being close to Allah is not a sensual corporeal pleasure that can be experienced by the body organs. The locus of this pleasure (ladhdha) is the heart defined as “subtle tenuous substance” al-Latifah al-Ruhaniyah (spiritual subtlety). This subtle substance connected to the physical heart is spiritual in nature and it is the substance by which the real essence of man is defined. It represents the locus of knowledge and intellection. It pertains to the realm of the sciences of mystical unveiling (‘ulum al-mukaashafa) and it represents the central concern of this science. It is also viewed as a Divine matter that transcends the capacity of intelligences (‘ukul) and understandings (afhem) to perceive and discern its nature and essence (Al-Ghazali, 1058/1111). The heart contains an inner sense ‘haassa baatina’ also called by Al-Ghazali “inner instinct” reserved for tasting spiritual Divine pleasures. Spiritual pleasures cannot be tasted without the existence of this inner sense as a locus for rejoicing these pleasures. And also they cannot be known unless tasted the same as sexual pleasures cannot be tasted without actual engagement in an intercourse.

Discussion and implications of the study

Corpus analysis has revealed the prevalence of erotic conceptualization of spiritual desires for the Divine. (Ostow, 1995, p. 219) maintains that “It is a commonplace that mystical literature is inclined to express the relationship between the mystic soul and the Divine by means of erotic imagery. Similarly, Evola (2004) states that:

One could argue that one contradiction is the fact that a religious system, whose laws concerning sexuality are so rigorous and whose punishments are so harsh, would even admit more or less explicit descriptions of those same acts to talk about the Sublime.

Even though sexuality and spirituality pertain to two entirely distinct and opposite domains, the former from a physical corporeal domain and the latter from a metaphysical and unintelligible domain, they are reunited in the experience of the sacred. Relying on findings of
the studies on embodiment, this section intends to provide explanation for the reasons that motivate the erotic conceptualization of the spiritual desires to account for what seems a contradiction of recruiting sexuality in a spiritual context.

One of the key aspects characterizing the mystic experience is its “ineffability” and “incommunicableness” as it constitutes “a new awareness of other levels of reality that are not accessible to normal consciousness” (James, 1902). It is especially an experience of highly abstract, vague, and inaccessible to the domain of perception realm. The Sufi experience represents typical Target domains that are “abstract, diffuse and lack clear delineation; as a result, they “cry out” for metaphorical conceptualization” (Kövecses, 2002, p. 20). Cacciri (1998, p. 121) suggests that metaphor functions to “bridge” from abstract domains to perceptual experiential domains and describe abstract ideas that are inexpressible by literal language. She conceptualizes metaphor as “a bridge” that serves to connect abstract entities (God is love) and abstract concepts to sensory-perceptual experiences, and perceptual experiences pertaining to different sensory modalities (“warm tension of the curved Lines”, “the rigid to the infinity”, “the flexible to the compact”). Metaphor is the cognitive mechanism that enables the recruitment of sensory-motor experience to conceptualize the abstract domain of desire for the Divine.

In the same context Johnson (2005, p. 16) argues that reasoning and comprehension are tightly shaped and constrained by the brain, the body and the environment, and that reasoning is not possible without the integration of three factors “a brain in a body in an environment”. Perceptual and sensory-motor structures are recruited to enable abstract reasoning and mental processes of conceptualizing abstract and concrete entities (Johnson, 2005, p. 16). Structures of the mind represent abstract reflections of the body sensorimotor activities “What we identify as the mental and then contrast it with the bodily dimensions of our experience are really just abstractions from the embodied patterns and activities that make up that experience” (Johnson, 2005, p. 18). Johnson and Lakoff (1999, p. 28) also argue that “What is important is not just that we have bodies and that thought is somehow embodied. What is important is that the peculiar nature of our bodies shapes our very possibilities for conceptualization and categorization”.

These claims are sustained by strong empirical evidence from research in neural modelling and neuroimaging of the brain, and psychological experiments. The neural theory of language (NLT) (Lakoff and Galeese, 2005 and Feldmen and narayanan, 2004) maintains that the same neural structures used in understanding concrete events and actions are employed to understand abstract events, that meaning understanding is fundamentally based on simulation of embodied experience, and that metaphorical concepts are grounded in concrete concepts.

Neuroscientific evidence revealed that concepts are embodied and that the sensory-motor system provides structural patterns to organize conceptual content. The evidence emerged from the discovery that imagining doing some action and actual doing of that action make use of the same neural substrate. Imagining moving activates the same part of the brain used in actual moving, grasping and imagining grasping use the same neural substrate. “Neural exploitation” is a fundamental aspect of human cognition that consists in the use of the brain sensory-motor mechanisms to serve higher-order mental processes (language and reasoning) alongside their original functions (Gallese and Lakoff, 2005, p. 456). Pecher and
Zwaan (2005, p. 1) suggest that conception is grounded in perception. Sensorimotor functions operating during immediate interaction with the environment through action and perception processes are the same functions utilized during “offline cognition” that is when reasoning about displaced past events and situations (Pecher and Zwaan, 2005, p. 2).

Neuroimaging research has indicated that brain areas and neural circuitries involved in the processing of perceptual and motor data are also activated in higher mental activities such as conceptualization (Coulson, 2008, p. 189). Gibbs’ (2005) reporting about the results of neuroimaging studies revealed that Conceptualization is the product of “tight coupling of cognitive and motoric processes”. Psychological experiments of Gibbs’ (2005) case study of DESIRE IS HUNGER concluded that abstract desires tend to be metaphorically conceptualized in terms of bodily desires for concrete objects such as lust and hunger: “he hungers for recognition, he hungers for adventure, he had a hunger for power”.

The aforementioned research explains the tendency in mystic literature and in the revival of the sciences of religion to recruit the sexual experience in order to conceptualize and convey the spiritual experience. (Rosch, 1999) argues that the spiritual experience resembles any other human experience in that it is experienced via the body that “bridges” the mind and the world. Although the pleasure of the mystic union with the Divine is a spiritual pleasure experienced by an inner spiritual instinct not by any body part, the sexual pleasure experienced by the body strongly constrained and shaped the conceptualization of the spiritual pleasure. Al-Ghazali considers the sexual pleasure as a pleasure from paradise if only it can last longer in time. The neural mechanism that enables the projection from sexuality to spiritual pleasure is called “neural recruitment”.

Lakoff (2015), discussing constraints on the brain’s neural system, argues that the brain becomes embodied from before birth when inborn-brain body neural connections, e.g. primitives for controlling movements, space, and force, are developed and established. Commonalities of brain and body plus common real world experiences determine and constrain the superstructure of the conceptual system. So that learning and acquisition of anything cannot be possible unless there is a pre-natal established neural circuitry for learning that thing. The conceptual system is tightly constrained by circuitries of the neural system. It cannot override these circuits. Any process of reasoning and conceptualization whether abstract or concrete depends entirely on neural recruitment of the available neural circuitries. Thus, since the circuitries are originally designed for sensory motor control purposes and there are no circuits designed for abstract reasoning, abstract reasoning necessarily depends on the recruitment of sensory-motor structures (Lakoff 2015).

Hence Sufis cannot invent novel structures to conceptualize the spiritual pleasures. They can only exploit what is available in the neural system. What is available is sensual corporeal experience. The erotic conceptual content of the sexual pleasure of a passionate love relationship experienced by the body is recruited to conceptualize the God-mureed relationship. What explains the choice of the domain of sexual experience from other varieties of concrete domains of bodily experience (food, building, light, nature, plants, animal, machines, and so on) is that there is a strong correlation of experience between a love relationship and a God-devotee relationship. Grady (1999, p. 81) introduces the notion of “primary metaphors”. They are motivated by strong experiential correlation that consists in a kind of co-occurrence in experiences for example the experiential motivation for DESIRE IS
HUNGER metaphor is the physical feeling of hunger and desire for food to satisfy that feeling. INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS e.g., “We have a close relationship”, AFFECTION IS WARMTH e.g., “They greeted me warmly”, and UNDERSTANDING IS GRASPING (e.g., “I’ve never been able to grasp complex math”). DESIRE FOR DIVINE UNION IS DESIRE FOR SEXUAL PLEASURES is motivated by a correlation between desire for sexual pleasures and desire for non-material pleasures.

What the study has presented is just a one perspective of approaching fusion of eroticism and spirituality in mysticism. There certainly still remains a multitude of other plausible perspectives. And also the findings are just speculative. Their validation is a matter of empirical testing. Future research may be interested in testing whether brain areas involved in processing sexual data are activated when engaging in spiritual practices such as when being in a spiritual seclusion with the “beloved” God (munajat). Empirical testing can include brainimaging of a devotee in a state of meditation or performing worship (dhikr, prayer, or even dancing that leads to the state of excitement called intoxication). This can be investigated in the research field of neurotheology.

Conclusion

Corpus analysis indicated the prevalence of erotic conceptualization of the spiritual desires for the Divine. The study has tried to provide an explanation of the contradiction of recruiting sensual lustful bodily experience to describe a spiritual experience of the mystic soul. It suggested that the embodied mind imposes constraints on the conceptualization process. Abstract reasoning is grounded and deeply rooted in the body sensory-motor experience and abstract reasoning is not possible beyond this experience. However findings need empirical validation.

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