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Sufi Narratives and Manifestations of Knowledge in Ayoub Al-Hajli's *The Seven Doors of the Soul*: A Hermeneutic Reading of the Threshold Discourse

السرديات الصوفية وتجليات المعرفة في رواية «أبواب الروح السبعة» لأيوب الحجلي:  
قراءة هيرمينوطيقية في خطاب العتبات

Les narrations soufies et les manifestations de la connaissance dans *Les Sept Portes de l'Âme* d'Ayoub Al-Hajli : une lecture herméneutique du discours des seuils

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## Sufi Narratives and Manifestations of Knowledge in Ayoub Al-Hajli's *The Seven Doors of the Soul: A Hermeneutic Reading of the Threshold Discourse*

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### Introduction

In literature, modes of expression vary between realism and symbolism. Yet, there exists a distinctive mode of narration that endeavours to reach the deepest strata of human existence : the mystical (gnostic) discourse. This form transcends the boundaries of materialist thought, venturing into the depths of the human soul to articulate profound spiritual experiences and the quest for truth and selfhood. It seeks self-knowledge and an understanding of the universe through contemplation and direct experience. This type of writing does not confine itself to conventional storytelling but opens new horizons for comprehending existence and the self, where the spiritual meaning stands as the ultimate objective.

Novels that engage with mystical discourse surpass traditional narrative techniques to reveal the human soul and interrogate the great questions of existence. The protagonist in these novels is not merely a fictional figure but an archetype symbolising the human journey towards union with the cosmos or the Divine. Hence, the mystical novel reflects the tension between body and soul, between the visible and the hidden, the material and the spiritual realms.

Within this framework, the present study examines *The Seven Gates of the Soul: A Journey in the Realm of the Self* by the Syrian author Ayoub Al-Hajli. This novel exemplifies the mystical narrative that transcends material reality, seeking a deeper meaning of life through a gnostic language imbued with spiritual and Sufi concepts, which require the reader's contemplative engagement and profound cognitive interaction.

From this introduction arises a set of central research questions : What is the self that Ayoub Al-Hajli seeks through his spiritual journey ? How can one attain authentic self-knowledge ? Is the gateway to the self located in the soul ? Does self-realisation entail transcending the body, or does it require a balanced integration between body and soul ?

This research is anchored on three main hypotheses :

1. That the self which the author seeks in *The Seven Gates of the Soul* embodies the essential human truth, accessible only through spiritual experiences.
2. That the gnostic language within the text is not a mere expressive tool but a medium of connection with existential meanings and an embodiment of the spiritual experience.
3. That self-realisation, as depicted in the novel, necessitates a delicate equilibrium between body and soul, where neither is sacrificed but both must interact harmoniously to achieve enlightenment.

The objective of this research is to explore the nature and dimensions of the gnostic discourse in narrative literature, with a particular focus on *The Seven Gates of the Soul* as a representative model. It aims to analyse the utilisation of mystical language and its interpretative depth to unearth the profound significations embedded in the text. Furthermore, it seeks to elucidate how the concept of the self is addressed within the mystical discourse, especially regarding the relationship between soul and body in the protagonist's spiritual quest.

To achieve these aims, the study adopts an integrated critical methodology combining hermeneutic, semiotic, and narrative analysis. It investigates the textual thresholds to reveal hidden symbols and significations, examining the construction of the mystical world through language and narrative architecture. The research applies threshold reading techniques to deconstruct titles and epigraphs accompanying the seven gates. It draws upon the mystical hermeneutic tradition, particularly as manifested in Sufi thought through figures such as Ibn Arabi and Al-Hallaj, to uncover the esoteric layers of the text and to contextualise them within the cultural and philosophical frameworks that informed Ayoub Al-Hajli's literary endeavour.

## **1. Ayoub Al-Hajli and the Path of Mystical Writing**

Ayoub Al-Hajli's writing is distinguished by its depth and enigmatic quality, demanding from its reader a contemplative spirit, embarking on a journey of discovery through its content. His works transcend the usual horizons of

expectation that readers have become accustomed to. Although every writer possesses their unique style, Al-Hajli belongs to an extraordinary creative lineage ; he is an exceptional creator in search of what lies beyond the visible, seeking the truth with the aim of merging with it and becoming part of it, in his pursuit of happiness derived from genuine knowledge.

In his epistemic journey, Al-Hajli does not rely on empiricism but rather follows a path based on inspiration and Sufi unveiling. He dives into the depths of the inner self to convey to us a truth that is not confined to the material but is a pure spiritual reality emerging from refined and detached knowledge.

His academic background in psychology has greatly aided him in exploring the intricacies of the human psyche and unveiling its secrets. Although literature is universally recognised as an art of creative expression, Al-Hajli, like other distinguished creators, employs it as a means to realise his visions and goals. He has published several works, including :

- Dark Beliefs : A Study of Ancient Religious History
- Sinful Rituals : A Study of Contemporary Religious History
- The Gods of Tears : A Social Novel
- Under the Shadows of the Stars : A Collection of Short Stories
- The Seven Gates of the Soul : Journey in the Realm of the Self (A Sufi Novel)
- The Black Truth : A Study in Religious Mythology
- Myths of the Lost World : A Study in Mythological Psychology

These works reflect Al-Hajli's deep awareness and his adeptness in employing his literary tools to create a unique and distinguished creative experience. He blends psychology with literature, producing an artistic experience that rests on psychological, philosophical, and spiritual dimensions, with an evident gnostic and Sufi character. His novel *The Seven Gates of the Soul : Journey in the Realm of the Self* stands out as an exceptional work that showcases his distinct style, which transcends the conventions of traditional narrative confession.

## **2. The Novel *The Seven Gates of the Soul* : Between Spiritual Experience and Mystical Discourse**

The novel *The Seven Gates of the Soul : Journey in the Realm of the Self* by Ayoub Al-Hajli represents a thoroughly mystical spiritual experience, rooted in the

deep foundations of Sufism that transcend the superficial narrative to touch the spiritual essence of the human being. The novel constructs its structure on the struggle of the self, purifying the soul from material attachments and carnal desires, as expressed by Hussein :

“The struggle against the self and its purification is the greatest veil that prevents unveiling.” (Hussein, 1992, p. 156)

This starting point renders the novel an endeavour to investigate the nature of the human self and its relationship with the Creator, employing a coded gnostic language that touches the psyche and embraces the emotions. It evokes the existential bewilderment that human beings experience in their inner world.

The novelist utilises the technique of the journey as a structural framework for the text, navigating through language fluidly, granting the reader an interpretive visa to access the world of the novel and contemplate its meanings. Through this, the text opens a gateway for the reader to explore the transcendent world, as Dirki noted :

“The infinite phenomena of the world, which belong to the infinite realm of divinity, stir reflections in the soul and inspire the soul to know what lies within its depths, where God reveals to the knower what he did not know.” (Dirki, 2006, p. 150)

From this perspective, the search for the essence of the soul becomes a shared quest between the reader and the protagonist. In the mystical conception that the novel conveys, the soul is the primordial origin that precedes the body, as Al-Alusi explains :

“The soul is the oldest of God's creations ; it lived, moved, and existed even before the world was created. It remains a stranger in its exile, yearning always to return to its celestial abode, far from the body.” (Al-Alusi, 1999, p. 21)

Al-Hajli further asserts the precedence and importance of the soul in guiding the body :

“The origin of existence is the soul, the essence that carries our body. If the soul is pure and clear, it leads the body to the gates of knowledge ; if it is led by the claws of the body, it becomes lost in the chaos of existence and loses the body along with it.” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 17)

He further emphasises the centrality of knowledge in refining the soul :

“The soul is a pure essence ; when refined with knowledge and the materials of the soul, it ascends and rises on the path of the suns of truth. But if it is immersed in the mire of the body, its flame fades and strays from the path.” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 37)

The mystical experience in the novel emerges as a cognitive space unbounded by places and times. The novelist articulates this by stating :

“It existed before all of this ; it preceded them in existence and rose above them in its qualities. What comes first is always higher in its attributes. Knowledge began, and from it descended the existing things, remaining connected, extending them with truth from its soul, for it is the oldest and the most enduring.” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 69)

This knowledge bears fruit only for those who possess the tools of contemplation, interpretation, and symbol decoding, placing the reader as an active partner in uncovering the mysteries of existence.

Thus, the protagonist’s journey becomes a reflection of the reader’s own journey. The protagonist, who “dies” and returns to an altered world, encounters the temple sage who discerns within him the seeds of wisdom and the readiness for knowledge.

This sets the stage for the seven gates, each representing a spiritual station, linking back to the temple and the sage. At the beginning of the journey, the sage advises :

“The soul existed before logic. You must accept life, flow within it, and rediscover it anew. You should understand life from your essence, not from your experiences with others.” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 15)

And the final reminder :

“Remember the purpose of this journey ? And who you are.” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 20)

In crafting his narrative language, Ayoub Al-Hajli employs a gnostic encryption that internalises dimensions of the self and the cosmos. Consequently, language transforms into a profound philosophical medium, as Al-Zein clarifies :

“The cryptographic structure of language is a means of indirect communication between the self and the world, resonating with the deep spiritual structure of the human self.” (Al-Zein, 2002, p. 60)

Therefore, meaning in mystical discourse is not a ready-made conclusion but an open interpretive experience. The novel does not present a closed narrative but a continuous journey between surface meaning and inner significance — the essence of Sufi writing, which refers each reader to the stages of truth according to their spiritual and intellectual preparedness.

### **3. Reading the Discourse of Thresholds and the Search for Meaning**

The discourse of thresholds in the art of the novel has garnered significant attention from many novelists, as thresholds are considered essential gateways to understanding the narrative text in all its dimensions and levels. In studying *The Seven Doors of the Soul : A Journey in the Realm of the Self* by Ayoub Al-Hajli, the thresholds reveal an intertwining between intellectual achievement and visionary depth, as the novel is founded on a Sufi philosophical idea centered on the realization of the self and the attainment of certainty.

The main title and the chapter titles in the novel serve as keys to understanding the text. They provide essential insights that help the reader engage with the world of the novel and grasp its profound meanings. Each title functions as a principal threshold within a network of intersecting meanings, clearly manifested in the novel structured around seven doors, which the protagonist must pass through in his quest for self-realization and absolute certainty.

#### **”Gate One: “The Suns of Truth Are Not Seen by Every Eye 3.1**

The first spiritual station traversed by the “Seeker of Wisdom” in his mystical journey bears the title : “*The Suns of Truth Are Not Seen by Every Eye*” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 21), a quotation from the Indian sage Shri Atmananda. In this gate, the protagonist encounters a blind man in the midst of a lush green forest with enchanting scenery. Following his arduous journey and severe hunger—having given his only piece of cheese to a starving female dog—he decides to accompany the blind man.

Overcome by exhaustion, thirst, and hunger, the protagonist momentarily rebels against the sage who had entrusted him with the symbolic satchel. Yet, once his anger subsides, he reflects :

“I realised that I was wrong to have rebelled... Accepting the journey was my choice... Giving the food to the dog was my choice... Breaking the bottle was my choice...” (*Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 26*)

Here, the protagonist comprehends that mastering one's impulses constitutes a pivotal stage of the journey, understanding that sustenance and providence are not synonymous. During his dialogue with the blind man, he perceives in him a profound knowledge and thus decides to remain by his side. Unexpectedly, the two characters merge, becoming one.

This symbolic fusion prompts the reader to question the nature of truth : Is it singular and absolute, or manifold and subjective depending on individual experience ? Is truth easily attained, or does it require struggle and inner conflict ?

### **The Illusion of Truth 3.1.1**

In this initial episode, the narrative suggests the exclusion of woman from the path of spiritual seeking, portraying her as a symbol of bodily temptation that leads to the loss of insight. This is illustrated when the blind man succumbs to the seduction of a woman he meets in the forest :

“She approached to place her lips on mine... As I felt the heat of her body, I no longer saw that shimmering brilliance... I realised I was blind and could not see the way... no...” (*Al-Hajli*, 2016, p. 34)

A parallel scenario unfolds with the hermit who had lived in seclusion for twenty years, dedicated to asceticism and worship. Upon his return, he carries a straw basket filled with water, which gradually spills as he is captivated by the allure of a charming girl :

“...and the water in the basket slowly trickled onto the floor of the shop.” (*Al-Hajli*, 2016, p. 37)

In both scenes, the author links woman to corporeal pleasure that weakens the epistemic experience and clouds spiritual perception. Succumbing to the body leads to the loss of both vision and insight, as illustrated by the blind man and the hermit.

However, the shoemaker, who remains immersed in the corporeal world without succumbing to it, represents a model of balanced consciousness and spiritual steadfastness. Accustomed to seeing women's legs and feet without being swayed, he achieves greater purity and resilience. Thus, true asceticism is not an escape from the world but a conscious liberation from its temptations while living within it.

The author calls for confronting the body, not fleeing from it ; for exercising awareness amidst tests of desire and attraction, while holding firmly to the supreme purpose of the self. As Gurkan affirms :

“Language is symbolic signs, nourished by the Sufi sensibility with new meanings, and symbols that comprehend the apparent and delve deeply into the hidden.” (*Gurkan*, 2008, p. 281-282)

Hence, the mystical text is replete with multiple significations that cannot be grasped in a single reading. As Mubarak notes :

“A text laden with multiple meanings requires repeated readings.”  
(*Mubarak*, n.d., p. 151)

Thus, the illusion of truth manifests in yielding to sensory perception and neglecting the inner world, rendering truth deceptive if not supported by knowledge and spiritual insight.

### **Absolute Truth 3.1.2**

In the journey of seeking truth, Nasif refers to the mechanism of understanding and the multiplicity of meaning within the text :

“In the first reading of the text, we interpret statements according to our prior mental associations with words. However, if we begin to doubt these associations, we start to grasp another meaning..” (*Nasif*, 1981, p. 160)

From this hermeneutical perspective, we can interpret the merging of the “Seeker of Wisdom” with the “blind man” in the novel. The Seeker, who lost his aim in the face of bodily hunger, merges with the blind man who, despite his physical blindness, could perceive with inner sight — until he too yields to carnal desire, leading both to the same result : the extinguishing of the light of knowledge and the loss of awareness.

This is explicitly expressed by the protagonist :

“When I craved the piece of cheese, I extinguished the light of knowledge [...] I no longer possessed any flame of knowledge...”  
(*Al-Hajli*, 2016, pp. 35-36)

Thus, absolute truth in the mystical conception is not a ready-made gift but lies within us, blind unless refined and brought to light through struggle and contemplation.

Accordingly, the body in the novel is not an end in itself but a means of spiritual ascension, provided it is disciplined and controlled. If the body is left to lead the self, it drags it into the darkness of desire and extinguishes the flame of insight. Therefore, absolute truth is delineated as a continuous internal journey, striving to emancipate the self from the shackles of the body towards the light of the soul.

## **Gate Two: “Learning Without Thinking Is Labour Lost, and 3.2**

## ”Thinking Without Learning Is Perilous

In the second gate, entitled with a quotation from Confucius, “*Learning without thinking is labour lost, and thinking without learning is perilous*” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 39), the novelist continues to trace the journey of the Seeker of Wisdom in his quest for glory and spiritual knowledge. At this point, the protagonist leaves the blind man, having exhausted the epistemological experience linked to him, and enters a dense, dark, and cold forest, where he finds a small hut inhabited by a blind old woman.

Here, the portrayal of the elderly woman differs entirely from the preceding gate. She symbolises purity and sanctity, reminiscent of the figure of the Virgin Mary, thereby representing a sacred feminine model, bearing connotations of spiritual wisdom and inner knowledge. Through this shift in imagery, the author elevates the feminine archetype from a position of debasement and seduction to one of profound spirituality, as the elderly woman assumes the role of mentor and guide to the Seeker of Wisdom.

The narrative, via this threshold, evokes the symbolic relationship between the protagonist and the myth of Sisyphus, alluding to the tension between imagined immortality and true spiritual eternity. Sisyphus, as a symbol of absurdity and futile effort, is condemned to perpetually push a boulder uphill only for it to roll back down, an endless cycle of frustration. This image contrasts with the representations of spiritual immortality embodied by Christian figures like Mary and Christ.

The author underscores the dialectical relationship between learning and thinking : learning detached from critical thinking results in sterile effort, akin to Sisyphus’s torment, while thinking without genuine learning leads to vanity and confusion — the downfall of Sisyphus, who believed himself a peer to the gods.

This contrast fosters an internal parallel between the protagonist and Sisyphus, both engaged in an existential and epistemic struggle. The reader, along with the protagonist, realises that myth is not merely a fanciful tale but a symbolic reflection of human existence itself. As the protagonist asserts :

“Indeed, it is the voice of ambition and arrogance within us ; we believe ourselves gods in moments of recklessness and haughtiness, forgetting that our weakness is embodied in this body we inhabit, which will one day be vanquished by the weakest of creatures... the earthworms...” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 63)

The author here transcends the notion of the world as *illusion*, identifying rebellion against the standards of truth as the root of falsity. Thus, seeking true knowledge cannot be accomplished without introspection and overcoming material inclinations. This is encapsulated in the blind woman's saying :

"Do not seek anything beyond your limits... seek it within yourself... the universe and all it contains are folded within you... within you lies the secret of life and immortality..." (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 64)

From this perspective, the myth of Sisyphus becomes a universal metaphor that inhabits each individual's life, recurring daily through accumulated ambitions and empty routines. While a superficial reading of the myth underscores the absurdity of life, a critical and reflective reading reveals the potentials for human struggle and renewal. This aligns with Albert Camus's view of the Sisyphus myth as a symbol of creative rebellion and the latent power in daily challenge.

Thus, the protagonist's representation of Sisyphus reflects an existential struggle concerning the nature and conditions of knowledge ; he feels knowledge is present but eludes him due to his lack of sufficient awareness to comprehend and interpret it. This is expressed in his lament :

"And he was lost amidst the melodies of chaos and the buzzing of the perishable body." (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 64)

Accordingly, the author's utilisation of the Sisyphus myth is not a mere symbolic projection but a methodological link between the visible and the hidden, the known and the unknown. As Adonis remarks :

"The image is not born from analogy through comparison but from approximation and the conjoining of two distant worlds."  
(Adonis, 1982, p. 120)

Thus, the author employs a linguistic structure that is abstract and spiritual, drawing from philosophy and mysticism. Consequently, engaging with this text becomes a genuine challenge for the ordinary reader, given the density of its symbols and the interwoven levels of meaning.

### **Gate Three: "You Are the Salt of the Earth ; But If the Salt Loses 3.3"? Its Flavour, With What Shall It Be Seasoned**

Following the long journey with Sisyphus, Ayoub Al-Hajli transitions the narrative to a new epistemic phase titled : "*You Are the Salt of the Earth ; But If the Salt Loses Its Flavour, With What Shall It Be Seasoned ?*" (Al-Hajli, 2016,

p. 65), a quotation from the Gospel of Matthew (5 :13). In this gate, the protagonist ascends to a higher level of awareness when his soul unites with the Divine Spirit within the sacred space of the church. There, he embodies the sufferings of Christ, experiencing spiritual communion by sharing in His pains and beseeching forgiveness for his people.

The sound of bells and hymns transforms into celestial music, transporting the protagonist physically and spiritually into the depths of the self, where he experiences emancipation, purification, and unification with God. He describes this pivotal moment :

“The sun began to set, and I was awaiting the opening of the gates of Paradise. I saw them : Abraham, Moses, Noah, and even Michael the sword-bearer approaching to take me to my throne and place. I closed my eyes, pleading with the Father to forgive them and envelop them with His love and forgiveness... I recalled the last words I uttered as I ascended : ‘Thy will be done.’” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 78)

In this gate, Al-Hajli illustrates that the spiritual experience culminates only through liberation from materiality and dissolution into the Divine Self. As Al-Yousef states : “The soul is liberated from the deterministic, logical, and limited.” (Al-Yousef, 2000, p. 35)

The protagonist encapsulates this realisation :

“I understood that immortality and purity must be preceded by a painful journey, and that love melts everything into itself ; love and mercy are themselves the essence and goal of knowledge. I remembered being told before : the human soul is like a gold ingot ; the more it enters the fire, the purer it becomes.” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 78)

According to the protagonist’s vision, spiritual knowledge manifests through four hallmarks, as defined by Maher Fayez (Al-Jadi, 2017) :

1. Focusing on the essence of worship rather than its form.
2. The centrality of Christ as the pathway from God.
3. The theology of salvation as a fundamental spiritual principle.
4. Worship performed with joy, resulting from actual Divine presence.

Thus, *the salt of the earth* symbolises the pure soul that imparts meaning to existence. When this soul becomes corrupted, knowledge itself degenerates into an empty form. This is further reflected when the protagonist recounts :

“There I was, circling around the luminous throne with praise and glorification, blessed by the complete spirit of the gnosis itself, surrounded by many angels in praise, awaiting the souls to begin directly with the self to enter into the ‘Zamalkan’...” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 72)

Here, he connects with the luminous beings — from Christ to prophets and angels — entering a phase of union with the higher world, thus attaining complete mystical salvation.

#### **Gate Four: “O Soul, When Will You Return to Your Supreme 3.4”? Place From Which You Came**

After the spiritual journey within the church, the Seeker of Wisdom transitions to the fourth gate, titled with a saying attributed to the sage Hermes : “*O Soul, when will you return to your supreme place from which you came ?*” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 79).

In this gate, the protagonist poses a profound existential question born of heightened self-awareness : *Where does Satan reside in our world ?* An elderly man he encounters in the church responds :

“Satan dwells within us, but in the cage of the soul ; if we open that cage, he will tear us apart with his fangs.” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 82)

The Seeker expresses his desire to search for the devil in the external world, but the old man redirects him to a more unsettling truth : Satan does not enter sacred spaces like churches or the Kaaba ; rather, he resides in the depths of the human soul. To elucidate this, the old man recounts a story of a devout man whose wife rejected his pious life, demanding divorce. He withdrew to the mountains to live among ascetics devoted to God.

In that pure environment, the ascetic, known as *the poor servant*, is tasked with fetching water using a straw basket. Miraculously, he manages to fill the basket without the water leaking, astonishing the ascetics who inquire about his secret. He replies :

“I said as you say... We say : we seek help with the patience of the pious servant upon the injustice of his wife.” (Al-Hajli, 2016, pp. 83-84)

This spiritual ingenuity reveals that Satan cannot dwell where the soul is pure and patient. He resides within the self when it weakens and succumbs to desires, and he is expelled only through enlightened awareness and inner purity—not mere seclusion from the world.

In the same vein, the narrative introduces a new trial : the Seeker confronts a nightclub dancer attempting to seduce him, but he declares :

“I do not wish to indulge in a lust that will rob me of the purity of experience ; I only want him to come out...” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 88)

His strategy is deliberate : his true desire is not the body, but to lure Satan into a tangible form and test his soul’s capacity to resist temptation.

The narrative progresses into a profound philosophical scene where the Seeker becomes the voice of Satan himself, engaging in an inner dialogue about the seduction of the pious servant. Despite possessing wealth, power, and beauty, the servant remains fortified by the light of God. Satan laments :

“Sometimes, giving wealth and power to humans is the first path from light to darkness — my darkness. But with him, wealth and power brought him closer to God [...] I could not touch your mind ; why is it veiled from me, inaccessible ? Tell me. Because if the mind is lost, certainty is lost, and the argument in worship is lost. You have no authority over a mind conscious of the Creator and His oneness [...] I realised there is a force greater than me that expels me from Paradise, that drew from me the threads of light. But no matter, for I remain a king in this world — a king of kings — and I shall seduce them until the Day they are resurrected...” (Al-Hajli, 2016, pp. 92-111)

This confrontation unveils that Satan is not merely an external force but a latent impulse within the human soul, betting on the weakening of the intellect — the final bastion of certainty. Once the mind is lost, faith falters, and the basis for worship collapses.

The narrative reinforces the notion that the pure soul, fortified with divine knowledge, is unassailable, whereas weak souls collapse at the first worldly trial. The devout servant, despite losing wealth, children, and health, remains unwavering in his certainty.

Thus, the author emphasises the soul’s struggle between light and darkness. Once again, the woman reappears as a symbol of temptation within the narrative structure. However, the critical message is that spiritual elevation is not achieved by fleeing the world but by confronting it with awareness and knowledge.

In the end, the protagonist realises that Satan, despite his power of embellishment and seduction, cannot dominate the purified soul imbued with remembrance and obedience. The text declares :

“The soul was at the centre of light in its glorious abode, swimming and circling in praise, and the self yearned to return to that tranquillity and that glorification... but Hell will accompany them until they reach their goal — only the pure among them will be saved.” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 111)

Thus, the narrative anchors the essential mystical equation : the pure soul ascends to the Divine, while the weak soul drowns in darkness. This is the essence of returning to “*the supreme place from which the soul came*” : a return to purity and the light in which it resided before the world’s seductions led it astray.

### **Gate Five: “No One Becomes Arrogant or Tyrannical Except 3.5” “Due to a Humiliation They Have Found Within Themselves**

The Seeker of Wisdom moves to the fifth gate, titled with a statement by the philosopher Ibn Rushd : “*No one becomes arrogant or tyrannical except due to a humiliation they have found within themselves*” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 113).

In this gate, Ayoub Al-Hajli projects the gnostic self deep into the political history of oppression and tyranny. The protagonist incarnates the persona of the Roman Emperor Nero, symbol of despotic power, insatiable for bloodshed and the destruction of others.

In a particularly brutal narrative scene, Nero reveals his sadistic desires :

“Tonight I decided to have intercourse on the balcony overlooking the garden, lighting the torches to enjoy the atmosphere. I released a group of prisoners into the garden, tying their bodies at random—not so that they could see me ravaging the prostitutes with savagery and lust, no—but to set their bodies on fire and relish their screams and the glow of the flames reflecting off the prostitutes’ breasts and uplifted legs before me.” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 118)

This scene embodies the author’s deep understanding of Roman political culture, founded on systematic violence and the pleasure derived from domination. Women, in this context, are transformed into political bait, objects upon which the ruler projects his frustrations and repressions.

The narrative then depicts Nero’s entrenched vengeance, illustrated by his ruthless murder of his mother, Agrippina, driven by fears of losing his throne, and his confrontation with the rebellious prostitute Poppaea, who shatters his illusion of control :

“Why don’t you obey my orders ?

— Your orders do not apply to me... she said, piercing into my eyes. I glimpsed the sharp gleam in her eyes, signalling a personality as defiant as mine. I slapped her hard, causing her to fall. She stood and retorted : ‘I want to see your manhood elsewhere,’ baring her teeth in a savage grin unfamiliar to me...” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 121)

The narrative escalates into a violent encounter culminating in Nero’s admission of his inner weakness before her :

“She stood and advanced toward me as I lay on the ground, placing her foot on my chest, completely naked. In that moment, I felt at her mercy. My obedience to Poppaea was not because she was a woman... nor because I desired her... but because she had seen through my fragile character and my fear of others. She saw how I attacked people with brutality and rage to mask my fear and imbalance of mind and judgement.” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 121)

Through this portrayal, the woman reappears in a dual symbolic role : as a seductress, but also as a revelatory force that exposes the vulnerabilities of the masculine, tyrannical power. She possesses the capacity to dismantle the structure of oppressive masculinity, which excels in suppression yet falters before the cunning of rebellious femininity.

Analytically, this gate functions as a historical projection designed to decipher the present : the tyranny of Nero mirrors modern authoritarian regimes that perpetuate oppression under the guise of authority and sovereignty. Nero exemplifies the epistemic ignorance that fuels political and social injustice.

The author reinforces this by portraying the ruler as someone who scripts the political scene like a theatrical play, where he kills and replaces characters at will — power becomes a malleable game, reshaped whenever new repression is required.

Ali Jaafar Al-Alaq’s observation resonates here :

“One of the possible meanings of the text being read is that readers, in their multitude, represent a fragmentation of meaning and its explosion in all directions.” (Al-Alaq, 1994, p. 65)

Therefore, this gate constitutes a condemnation of authoritarian systems that have inherited Nero’s bloodthirsty spirit. Concurrently, the author offers

a psychological reading of power, echoing Ibn Rushd's insight that arrogance and tyranny are but compensations for an internal sense of humiliation.

Thus, the novel deconstructs the power-woman dynamic : although woman appears as a seduction, she also emerges as a profound revealer of the vulnerabilities of the self in power.

Moreover, the narrative suggests that the history of tyranny is not merely a relic of the past but a persisting reality in contemporary political and social contexts, where Neronian traits resurface in oppressive policies driven by ignorance, fear, and existential emptiness.

Ultimately, this gate represents a crucial stage in the Seeker's journey, re-establishing the connection between knowledge, power, oppression, desire, and politics. Fame, power, and possessions are portrayed as illusions hindering the soul's ascent towards true knowledge. Hence, the protagonist's journey is not merely temporal or historical but profoundly introspective, confronting the darkest recesses of the self — a prerequisite for spiritual elevation.

### **Gate Six: "He Who Rules Others is Strong, But He Who Rules .3.6 Himself is Mighty**

In this gate, the Seeker of Wisdom enters a deeply contemplative experience, inspired by Lao Tzu's aphorism : *"He who rules others is strong, but he who rules himself is mighty"* (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 129).

Following his immersion in the world of tyranny and despotism within the Roman Empire, the Seeker finds himself in a tranquil and serene village, where the faces of the people radiate light, their livelihoods are abundant, and their homes reflect simplicity, harmoniously situated near the graves.

In this symbolic setting, he is welcomed by an elderly sage who refers to him as *"the awaited wise man"*, confirming that he is now close to the secret of truth. Through dialogue with the villagers and their king, the Seeker realises that knowledge is not an external commodity but an internal state of consciousness, wherein tranquillity leads to truth and light signifies spiritual salvation.

The identical nature of the houses in the village symbolises the impermanence of material possessions and the unification of purpose. Their proximity to the graves serves as a constant reminder of destiny and mortality, signifying that life's ultimate station is the return to dust after fulfilling the existential and epistemic trial.

Within this context, the Seeker unveils the meaning of the “*source of life*” sought by the king and his court. The stone presented by the ascetic to the king symbolises the human eye, which is never satiated except by dust. When a handful of soil is placed on the scale alongside the king’s treasures, it outweighs them — a metaphor indicating that human fulfilment does not lie in accumulation but in the awareness of one’s finitude, and that true immortality is achieved through detachment from passions.

From this profound epistemic insight, the Seeker is transported temporally and symbolically to the era of Saladin (Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi), where he witnesses the Battle of Hattin — a confrontation where the believing spirit triumphs over despotic desires. This scene starkly contrasts the experience of governance in the Roman Empire, defined by bloodshed and intrigue, with that of the Abbasid era, embodied in the just ruler who governs with mercy and leads with spirituality.

Thus, the maxim “*He who rules others is strong, but he who rules himself is mighty*” is embodied as a gnostic principle, where the external world cannot be governed without first mastering the internal self ; strength and self-discipline are inseparable. The enlightened self, when it controls its inclinations, becomes capable of leading others and transcending the corporeal towards the purity of the soul.

In this gate, the narrative transcends mere geographical or historical transitions, instead constructing an inward journey progressively ascending towards spiritual fulfilment. The peaceful village, with its simple, contemplative features, becomes an allegory for the purified self that has attained balance, where materiality holds no dominion, and desire is subdued.

### **Gate Seven: “He Who Turns Away from What Lies Between .3.7”Eternity and Perpetuity Has Grasped the Handle of Truth**

In this final gate of the mystical journey, the Seeker of Wisdom invokes the saying of Al-Hallaj : “*He who turns away from what lies between eternity and perpetuity has grasped the handle of truth*” (Al-Hajli, 2016, p. 153), announcing his arrival at the point of self-revelation, where the soul unites with knowledge, and the supreme truth of the self is unveiled.

Here, the Seeker methodically arranges the knowledge acquired through the preceding six gates, summarising their essential insights :

- First Gate: A lesson in the fragility of the self in the face of carnal temptation, embodied in the blind man who lost his insight when he surrendered to the woman’s seduction.

- Second Gate: Demonstrates that arrogance and overconfidence, as seen with Sisyphus, lead to absurdity and strip the self of freedom and dignity.
- Third Gate: Emphasises the importance of forgiveness and love as pathways to liberation, inspired by the experience of Christ who forgave sins and taught the essence of love.
- Fourth Gate: Addresses the inner struggle with the devil inherent within the self, a battle surmounted only through divine knowledge, as exemplified by the pious servant.
- Fifth Gate: Reveals the collapse of values under tyranny, exemplified by Nero's descent into self-destruction and the devastation of his people due to the absence of ethical and just governance.
- Sixth Gate: Clarifies that immortality is not attained through rule or power but through the purification of the self, drawing on the example of Saladin as the model of the just ruler.

After these stages, the Seeker returns to the garden from which he was once expelled, and it is only then that he drinks from its pure waters, having purified his soul and attained the rank of knowledge. He enters his chamber, lights the candle of wisdom, and heads towards the portico to meet the sage, informing him that he has returned with a wealth of gnostic insight, now understanding that *exploring the self is the path to comprehending cosmic existence*.

At the conclusion of his journey, he finds himself surrounded by new seekers of wisdom and addresses them:

“Self-knowledge is the key to knowing the universe ; there is no way to emancipation without crossing the gateway of the self. He who knows himself knows the order of existence and understands the truth of his being.” (Al-Hajli, 2016, pp. 167-168)

Herein, the essence of the mystical experience is realised — not as the end of a spiritual path but as the beginning of a new journey that is endlessly renewed with each new seeker, as the garden expels them one by one, symbolising that *truth is not a fixed destination but an eternal quest*, attainable only by the luminous self capable of knocking on the hidden doors of existence.

## Conclusion

This interpretive journey reveals that the text continuously regenerates itself through a profound mystical vision that perceives *wisdom* as a universal gateway where religions and cultures converge. Sufism is represented here

as an existential and spiritual dimension that transcends narrow religious affiliations, affirming the unity of human experience. In this context, woman emerges as the nexus between body and soul — at times symbolising seduction, at others embodying a force of salvation — emphasising symbolically the necessary balance between instinct and knowledge.

The novel clearly reflects influences from existentialist, Eastern, and Indian philosophies, alongside a pronounced presence of spiritual culture and an awareness of Abrahamic religions. Additionally, the principle of *the transmigration of souls* underpins the novel's structure. Throughout his symbolic journey across the seven gates, the Seeker of Wisdom assumes various identities : the blind man, then Sisyphus, then Christ, followed by Job, the Devil, Nero, a soldier of Saladin, and finally, the awaited king. This is achieved through the intersection of his consciousness with theirs, manifesting a form of *cosmic consciousness*.

This recurrent embodiment of historical and mythical figures is not merely an artistic device but a reflection of the concept of knowledge as a shared memory, collectively retrieved and interpreted by both author and reader. In this sense, the protagonist's incarnations fulfil the author's desire for permanence and immortality, where cosmic consciousness becomes a means of liberation, a gateway transporting the self from the prison of the mundane world to the horizon of the soul — where the distance between being and Being, between the individual and their supreme reference, is diminished.

Therefore, the seven gates represent condensed existential and epistemological trials, recalling the major stages of human history as a means of first understanding the self and subsequently interrogating the collapsed values of contemporary civilisation. The author transcends linear narration to embrace a contemplative spiritual writing style, where the word becomes an experience, knowledge a journey, and writing an introspective voyage reshaping the self in light of the supreme truth.

In this perspective, this mystical novelistic experience opens new avenues for comparison with other works of contemporary Sufi or global spiritual literature, such as the novels of Paulo Coelho or Hermann Hesse, where themes of self-discovery, inner travel, and cosmic wisdom intersect. Comparing these texts with *The Seven Gates of the Soul* could deepen our understanding of the aesthetics of mystical discourse and its diverse manifestations in contemporary world literature.

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## Abstract

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This study aims to analyze the gnostic discourse in the novel *The Seven Doors of the Soul* by the writer Ayoub Al-Hajli, by exploring the linguistic structure of the text and interpreting its symbols to uncover its esoteric and spiritual meanings. The study focuses on the dialectical relationship between the soul and the body within the quest for knowledge, and on the methods of achieving balance between these two components in the context of the Sufi gnostic experience.

The research concludes that the novel presents an integrated vision of the path towards knowledge, through the interaction between the body and the soul within a cognitive experience that aspires to elevation and transcendence. Moreover, the gnostic language employed by the author imparts to the text a symbolic depth that opens up multiple interpretative horizons for the reader, enabling them to go beyond the apparent narrative level to probe the underlying philosophical and existential meanings.

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## Keywords

gnostic discourse, quest for knowledge, soul and body, symbolism, Ayoub Al-Hajli

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## ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل الخطاب العرفاني في رواية أبواب الروح السبعة للكاتب أيوب الحجلي، من خلال استكشاف البنية اللغوية للنص وتأويل رموزه للكشف عن معانيه الباطنية والروحية. تركز الدراسة على العلاقة الجدلية بين الروح والجسد في إطار رحلة البحث عن المعرفة، وعلى كيفية تحقيق التوازن بينهما في سياق التجربة الصوفية العرفانية. وقد خلص البحث إلى أن الرواية تقدم رؤية متكاملة لمسار تحقيق المعرفة، من خلال تفاعل الجسد والروح في تجربة معرفية تنزع إلى السمو والتعالى. كما أن اللغة العرفانية التي يعتمد عليها الكاتب تُضفي على النص عمقاً رمزياً يفتح أمام القارئ آفاقاً لتأويلات متعددة، تتجاوز المستوى السردى الظاهري إلى استبطان المعاني الفلسفية والوجودية الكامنة.

## لكلمات المفتاحية

الخطاب العرفاني، البحث عن المعرفة، الروح والجسد، الرمز، أيوب الحجلي

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## Résumé

Cette étude vise à analyser le discours gnostique dans le roman *Les Sept Portes de l'Âme* de l'écrivain Ayoub Al-Hajli, à travers l'exploration de la structure linguistique du texte et l'interprétation de ses symboles afin de révéler ses significations ésotériques et spirituelles. L'étude se concentre sur la relation dialectique entre l'âme et le corps dans le cadre de la quête de connaissance, ainsi que sur la manière d'établir un équilibre entre ces deux composantes dans l'expérience soufie gnostique.

La recherche a abouti à la conclusion que le roman propose une vision intégrée du processus de réalisation de la connaissance, à travers l'interaction entre le corps et l'âme dans une expérience cognitive visant l'élévation et la transcendance. De plus, la langue gnostique adoptée par l'auteur confère au texte une profondeur symbolique qui ouvre au lecteur des perspectives d'interprétations multiples, dépassant le niveau narratif apparent pour sonder les significations philosophiques et existentielles enfouies.

## Mots-clés

discours gnostique, quête de la connaissance, âme et corps, symbole, Ayoub Al-Hajli

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