

Reception of Sufism in Arabic Literature

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ABSTRACT

The title which I have chosen for this paper “*Reception of Sufism in Arabic Literature*” demands for a few words of explanation at the very outset. Sufism or *Taşawwuf* is the inner mystical dimension of Islam. Mysticism implies to something mysterious that cannot be understood by ordinary means. Interestingly, both the words of “*mystic*” and “*mystery*” have been derived from the common Greek root of “*myein*” which means “*to close the eyes*”.¹ In a simple term mysticism could be defined as “*Consciousness of the One Reality*”.² The word Sufi is derived from the root word “*safa*” which in Arabic means “purity”. Another origin is “*suf*” refers to woollen garments which were the distinguishing marks of the first generation of Muslim Sufis.

Keywords: Reception of Sufism, Sufism, Arabic Literature

Introduction

It is difficult to define the complex phenomenon of Sufism. It has been defined like the definition of the elephant by the blind men in the famous story of “the blind men and an elephant”. Once a few blind men were asked to touch an elephant and describe it. Accordingly, each one of them described the elephant according to the part of body he touched. As a result, to one who touched the backbone, the elephant appeared like a throne, to another who touched it’s ear, the elephant appeared to him like a fan. One who touched the trunk of the elephant it appeared to him like a water pipe and the last blind man who touched the leg of the elephant described it like a pillar. None could imagine what the whole animal would look like. Such is the case with Sufism; everyone described it in accordance with his/her level of reaching to it. Sufism as a doctrine gained popularity among a number of

¹ Mystical Dimensions of Islam by Schimmel , Annemarie, University of North Carolina press, Chapel Hill,USA ,August 1976,page no.3

² Mystical Dimensions of Islam by Schimmel , Annemarie, University of North Carolina press, Chapel Hill,USA ,August 1976,page no.4

Muslims as a reaction against the worldliness of the early Umayyad Caliphate. By the time, caravan of Sufis travelled through the several continents and cultures down the centuries.

Arabic Sufi literature is a rich one. This is the inheritance of the great Arabic scholars down the ages. Arabic Sufi literature (which comprises both prose as well as poetry) is a literature which gets its expression from the hearts filled with love. A literature which carries the vast experiences of Sufi-saints, of their feelings and emotions and their urge to meet their beloved. Sufi literature is predominantly an Islamic literature. *Al Madaih al Nabawiyah* or the poems of eulogies to the prophet Muhammad (May peace be upon him) was an addition to the Art of eulogy (*fann-il-madhe*) in Arabic literature. Development of Sufi poetry was a development of Islamic religious poetry. Though my topic comprises both the segments of prose and poetry of Arabic Sufi literature, emphasis will be given more on poetry segment with only a bird's eye view on prose literature.

For convenience of discussion let me present the scenario of Sufi Arabic poetry in different phases.

Phase 1

(100-200 A.H)

This early phase of Sufi Arabic poetry literature comprises the 2nd hijri century in its entirety along with the early period of Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad. In this period, Sufi poetry developed with its own artistic traditions and thoughts. Rabia Al Adawiya (d.185 A.H) was a prominent poetess of this time. She composed a poem in the praise of Allah. Following are the few verses of the poem.

و أغلقت قلبي عن سواك	عرفت الهوي مذ عرفت هواك
خفايا القلوب و لسنا نراك	و كنت اناجيك يا من تري
و حبا لأنك اهل لذاك	احبك حبين حب الهوي
فشغلي بذكرك عن سواك	فاما الذي هو حب الهوى
فكشفك للحجب حتى اراك. ³	واما الذي انت اهل له

Translation: -

I knew love, since I fell in your love;

³ http://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/رابعة_العدوية

And closed my heart from every one, save you.
I was whispering with you,
O He who sees the secrets of hearts while we do not see you.
I love you two loves; love of fancy and love as you are worthy to it.
However, the love of fancy is my engagement with your remembrance only.
And the love you are worthy to it, is your removal of veils so that I can see you.

Phase 2

(3rd and 4th century A.H)

Arabic Sufi poetry literature got its boost and promotion in this period. This is the time of Al Mutanabbi, Sharif al Radhi and other prominent Arabic scholars. Famous Sufi poets of this time were Abu Tutrab Al Nakhshabi (d.245 A.H) and Abu Hamzah Al Khurasani. Abu Tutrab Al Nakhshabi composed the following verses on love.

و لديه من تحف الحبيب وسائل	لا تخذعن فللحبيب دلائل
و سروره في كل ما هو فاعل	منها تنعمة بمر بلائه
و الفقر إكرام و بر عاجل ⁴	فالمنع منه عطية مقبولة

Translation: -

Never deceive, since the lover has evidences;
He has means out of the gifts of beloved.
Among them simplification of his troubles;
And his (beloved) pleasures in all his deeds,
His refusal is an accepted gift;
Poverty is an honor and an immediate virtue.

Phase 3

(5th and 6th century A.H)

In this period the Arabic Sufi literature inclined more towards the themes like love of God (Al Hubbul Ilahi), eulogy of Prophet Muhammad (Al Madaih al Nabawiyah) and description of the holy places of Islam like Makkah and Madina. Important to note here that, in this period the Persian Sufi poetry literature developed.⁵ This is the period in which Abul Ala Al Mua'rri and Muhyar got prominence in Arabic literature. Among the prominent Sufi

⁴ الأدب في التراث الصوفي. صفحة 168. مكتبة غريب

⁵ الأدب في التراث الصوفي. صفحة 169. مكتبة غريب

Arabic poets of this time were Al Suhrawardi Al Shami (586 A.H), Al Rifaae(587 A.H), Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Ahmad Al Andalusi Al Qurashi and famous Sufi saint Abdul Qadir Al Jilani (561 A.H) and Abdul Rahman Al Barea.

Abdul Qadir Al Jilani (561 A.H) composed the following verses on prayer to Allah.

يا من تحل بذكره	عقد النوائب و الشدائد
يا من إليه المشتكي	و إليه أمر الخلق عائد
يا حي يا قيوم يا صمد	تنزه عن مضادد
أنت العليم بما بلّيت	به و أنت عليه شاهد
أنت الرقيب علي العباد	و أنت في الملكوت واحد
أنت المنزه يا بديع	الخلق عن ولد و والد
أنت المعز لمن أطاعك	و المذل لكل جاحد
فرج بحولك كربتي	يا من له حسن العوائد
فخفي لطفك يستعان	به علي الزمن المعاند
يا رب قد ضاقت بي	الأحوال و اختال المعاند. ⁶

Translation: -

O He whose remembrance removes the difficulties and adversities;

O He to whom complaints are lodged, and to whom all matters of the creation are addressed.

O Alive! O Self-withstand! O Eternal! Be free from contradictions.

You are aware of what I am troubled, and you are witness of it.

You are vigilant on your subjects, and you are one and alone in your kingdom.

You have neither parents nor children, O the Creator of creation.

You give honor to one who obeys you and humiliate one who disobeys you.

Relax my grief by your might O He who gives nice rewards.

Your kindness, to which help is sought in recalcitrant time has disappeared.

O my Lord! My conditions have confined me and the recalcitrant time has showed arrogance.

Phase 4

(7th century A.H)

In this period Arabic Sufi poetry reached the zenith of its development. Poets like Ibn Al Faridh (632 A.H) (who was the contemporary of Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi), Muhiuddin

⁶ الأدب في التراث الصوفي. صفحة 170. مكتبة غريب

Al Arabi (638 A.H), Al Busiri (695 A.H), Abdul Aziz Al Dumairi (694 A.H) and Ibn Ataullah Al Sikandari (707 A.H) and others got familiarity in promotion of Arabic Sufi poetry. Muhyiddin Muhammad bin Ali Ibn Al Arabi (A.H 561- AH 638) was considered one of the most important Sufi masters. His writings, especially “*Al-Futuhah Al-Makkiyah*” have been studied within all the Sufi orders as the clearest expression of *Tawhid* (Divine Unity). Later on his teachings became known as the school of *Wahdat al-Wujud* (The Oneness of Being).

Following are the few verses from the works of prominent poets of this period as an example of their poetic proficiency.

Ibn Al Faridh wrote at the very outset of his Qasidah Al yayiyah.

منعما عرج على كئيبان طي	سائق الأظعان يطوي البيد طي
ت بحي من عريب الجزع حي	و بذات الشيخ عني إن مرر
علمهم أن ينظروا عطفًا إلي	وتلطف واجر ذكري عندهم
ما له مما براه الشوق في	قل: تركتُ الصب فيكم شجبا
كل شيء حسن منكم لدي	بل أسيئوا في الهوي أو أحسنوا
أنَّ عيني عينه لم تتأي	كهلال الشك لولا أنه
ينقضي ما بين إحياء وطي	في هواكم رمضان عمره
تكسب الأفعال نصبا لام كي	نصبا أكسبني الشوق كما
صاده لحظ مهاة أو ظبي؟	هل سمعتم أو رأيتم أسدا
قال: ما لي حيلة في ذا الهوي ⁷ .	وضع الآسي بصدري كفه

Translation: -

O the driver of caravan which rushes through the deserts,

Kindly halt at the sand hill of “Tai” tribe.

And convey my salute to “zat-e-shaih”(name of a place) if you pass by the locality of “uraib al jazei”.

Be kind and friendly, and narrate my condition to them, hope they would kindly look at me.

You tell them: I left my passionate love to you as an imagination, the passion which my desire has given a shape in me.

⁷ القصيدة البيانية لابن الفارض

Misbehave with me or behave gently in love, all is well & fine from you.

He is as thin as the crescent of doubt, had he not cried my eyes would not have recognized him (lover).

In your love, his life has become like the month of "Ramadan" which passes in sleep and wake.

The desire has given me the hardship as the "lam-e-kai" gives nasab (accusative case) to verbs.

Have you ever heard of or seen a lion who was hunt by wild cow or gazelle?

Distress has gripped me and said: I don't have any remedy for lovers.

Phase 5

(8th century A.H_till date)

Beginning from the 8th century A.H this period continues to till date. Famous scholars of the Sufi Arabic literature of this period were Al Shaa'rani (897-973 A.H), Al Nabalusi and others.

With Ibn al Arabi and Ibn al Farid's writings Arabic poetry perfectly depicted the precise teachings of Sufism. Ibn al Arabi, composed a vast amount of poetry scattered among his prose works, particularly in "*Al-Futuhāt-al-Makkiyah*." Some of the *dīwāns* of Arabic poetry of poets such as Shaykh al-Alawi and Shaykh Habib have remained popular.

Employment of mystic concepts has been an interesting phenomenon in contemporary Arabic literature. Mystic dimensions in contemporary Arabic poetry reflect nearly all aspects of mysticism. However contrary to the medieval Sufi poets, contemporary poets do not practically follow a mystic or Sufi way of life. Early mystic Arabic poetry arouses along with the development of Sufi theory at the beginning of the ninth century A.D and flourished during the next several centuries. Its origin was in the spontaneous utterances of the early Sufis who poetically expressed their love of God and at the same time their rejection of worldly pleasures. Noteworthy medieval Sufi poets included Rabia Al Adawiyya (d.801), Husain bin Mansur al Hallaj (858-922), Umar bin al Farid (1181-1234) and Muhiyuddin al Arabi(1164-1240). Mansur al Hallaj (d. 922 AD) is known for his claim "Ana-al-Haq" (I am The God). Junayd Baghdadi (830-910 A.D) was one of the great early Sufis who laid the groundwork for sober mysticism in contrast to that of Sufis like al-Hallaj, Bayazid Bastami and Abu Saeid Abul khair.

From the Thirteenth century A.D. a new genre of Sufi poetry emerged namely the panegyric poems for the prophet Muhammad (Al Madaih al Nabawiyyah). Traditional Sufi poetry has

been primarily written within the circles of Sufi orders and published by magazines such as “*Majallat al Tasawwuf al Islami*”, the organ of the high council of the Sufi orders in Egypt as well as in special religious collections. Needless to say, the discourse which such kind of poetry supports and of which it is an integral part is the Islamist discourse.

The birth of modern Arabic poetry in the second half of the nineteenth century paved the way for appearance of mystic dimensions in non-religious poetry. Neo-classical poets such as the Egyptians Mahmud Sami Al Barudi (1839-1904), Ahmad Shawqi (1868-1932) and Hafiz Ibrahim (1871-1932) and the Iraqis like Jamil Sidqi al Zahawi(1863-1936) and Maruf al Rusafi(1875-1945), turned to the poetic medieval heritage in trying to achieve similar qualities. Dealing only marginally with mystic essential topics, these poets concentrated primarily on stylistic imitation of the early Sufis and panegyric poems for the prophet. Consequently, their poems prompted by the attempt to exhibit a high degree of technical ability generally seem a bit insincere in their expressions of divine love.

The rich spiritual and intellectual legacy of medieval Islamic mysticism has influenced, in significant ways many modern Arab novelists and poets. Their works abound in traditional Sufi terminology. As a vivid example the novels of the Egyptian writer Nagib Mahfuz, a 1988 recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literary achievement can be cited. His novels written in 1960's, especially “The Beggar” and “The Thief and the Dogs”, display an elaborate mixture of traditional Sufi themes and current European intellectual trends and literary fashions. Sufi themes are even more pervasive in the writings of many Arab poets who have eagerly availed themselves of the mystical legacy.⁸

In the abundant literature of medieval Sufi tradition, the contribution of Ibn Arabi, the exponent of the mystical teaching known as “The Unity of Being” (Wahdat al wujud), holds special fascination for contemporary Arab writers. It is difficult to briefly mention all the instances on which Ibn Arabi's personality and ideas are used in the Arabic Literary discourses of the recent decades. Two Arab novelists, the Syrian Muhammad Gazi Arabi and the Egyptian Gamal al Ghitani, both of them have used Ibn Arabi's image in their literary works. In so doing, they have articulated two distinct approaches to Ibn Arabi's personality and mystical doctrine which are typical of many contemporary Muslim intellectuals.

⁸ The Muslim World LXXXVI No. 1 January, 1996

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