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Poetry and Sufism : Path of love

I- Introduction :

A – Sufism : Origin and background

The word “sufi” is derived from the Arabic word (safa’) meaning limpidity . to become a limpid , a man must transform his bad disgraced ethics into more pure ones. (al-Shushturi, al- Risala al-Shushtariyah, Casablanca , 2004, p 136), this limpidity is strongly related to idea of wearing wool (suf) , for the latter serves as a symbol of reuniciation of the world.
The sufi as mentioned in al-Gazali’s book (Ihya’ ulum al-Dine: 4/334) “ is the lover in God , then the Divine love is the purpose of the sufi stages”.

The sufi view of reality derives from the Quran and the Hadith , but it has been amplified and adapted by generations of sufi teachers . Surely one of the greatest theologians and philosophers was al-Gazali (d1111 CE) , who wrote some sufi treatises, and Islamic theology . I mention here his famous work called the “ Reconstruction of religious sciences “ (Ihya’ ulum al-Dine), that is considered as a foundation stone of the sufi doctrine in the Islamic world.

It is worthwhile mentioning the fact that Sufism and its teaching originated from Quran , and compatible with mainstream Islamic thought and theologie.

Al-Gazali bridged the gap between traditional and mystical Islam.
It was around the 10^{th} century that the early sufi literature in the form of manuscripts , treatises , discourses , and poetry , became the source of sufi thinking and meditations.

Sufi poetry is recited by Sufis to enhance mystical awarness . It written in the classical era, were by Arab poets such as : Rabia al-‘Adawiyah,Ibn al-Farid , Ibn al-‘Arabi, Abu ‘Imran al-Mirtulli , ‘Aisha al-Bau’niyah,and Persian poets such as : al-‘Attar, Rumi , al-Karmani.

Ibn al-Arabi and Rumi are seen as best well-known in the West for their poetic works.

The central theme on which the sufi thinking is based is the Divine love ; the separation of the lover from the Beloved , and the individual soul’s desire for mystical union with the universal soul.

II - Poetry and Sufism :

A- Path of love :

The sufi embarks on spiritual journey known as the sufi path: a path of devotion and love which leads to the Divine reality.

To start with the sufi goal is ultimately spiritual. It interiorizations of our return to the Divine reality. Thus , the poetry goal is to evoke and create deep inner experiences culminated by spiritual experiences.

The central doctrine of Sufism is “the Divine love “. In the Quran there are numerous references to love (hubb) as when God said “ God bring a people whom He loveth and whom love Him “ (5: 54) .

بسم الله الرحمان الرحيم

{ قل إن كنتم تحبون الله فاتبعوني يحببكم الله ويغفر لكم ذنوبكم والله غفور رحيم } : سورة آل عمران آية 31 .

In fact,the Quran teaches that God’s love is his extensively supreme attribute . The mainspring of sufism is love , the aim of which , the sufi path becomes a “ path of love “ where the sufi becomes the “ lover “ and God the “Beloved” . this love relationship is depicted in most volumes of sufi literature and poetry.

From their part , historians have commonly talked about of the gradual development of Sufism that begins in a mysticism of asceticism and fear, slowly changes to an emphasis on love devotion and then turns to stressing knowledge Gnosis. (See: W.Chittick, Sufism : a short introduction , 2000,p 61).

In one of Rabia al-Adawiyah who first transformed a mysticism from the fear factor to love factor . In fact , she introduced an example of the

Divine love, which made an impression over following generation , she writes :

Two way I love Thee : selfishly ,
And next , as worthy is of Thee .
'Tis selfish love that I do naught
Save think on Thee with every thought .
'Tis purest love when Thou dost raise
The veil to my adoring gaze .
Not mine the praise in that or this
Thine is the praise in both , I wis .

(trans . A.M.Schimmel , As through a veil , 1982, p 18).

أحبك حبين حب الهـــوى وحـــبا لأنـك أهـل لـذاكـــــا
فأمـــا الذي هو حـب الهـوى فـشغـلي بذكرك عـمن سواكا
وأمـــا الذي أنـــت أهل لـــه فكـشفـك للحـجب حتـى أراكـا
فلا الحمـد في ذا ولاذاك لي ولكـن لـك الحمد في ذا وذاكـا

On the other hand , the Divine love doctrine took different numerous names in the sufi path , for example , Ibn al-'Arabi (d1240) one of the greatest Andalusian- Arab mystic , described a Divine love as a religion and belief :

Agarden among the flames
My heart can take on any form ;
A meadow for gazelles,
A cloister for monks,
For the idols , sacred ground
Ka'ba for the circling pilgrim
The tables of the Torah
The scrolls of the Quran
My creed is love
Wherever is caravan turns along the way
That is my belief , my faith.

(Ibn al-'Arabi, Turjuman al-ashwaq, 1981, p 44).

لقد صـــارقلبي قابلا كـل صـــورة فمرعـــى لغزلان وديـــر لـرهبان
وبـيت لأوثـــان وكـــعبة طـــائـــف وألـــواح تـوراة ومـــصحف قـــرآن
أدـــين بـدين الحـــب أنـــى توجهت ركـــائبه فالـــحب دينـــي وإيـــماني

we can also find another image of doctrine's love in sufi poetry , in Ibn al-Farid's poems - one of the most famous Egyptian sufi poets – he considered a Divine love as a doctrine and religion , for he set a hierarchical situation in the Divine love , where the poet lover surpasses other lovers , and represents an "Imam" (leader) to them , in other words he is their sentimental experience model.

In short, love for God grows up from the basic declaration of faith , the assertion of God's unique reality since love is a Divine attribute. It follows that " there is no true lover and no true Beloved , but God " . (Ibn al-'Arabi , al-Futuhat al-Makkiyah II/113).

Rumi (d 1273), one of the greatest poets of the Persian world , portrays such union with the Beloved through a poetic imagery, which creates specific inner effects :

The joy and heartache of lovers is He,
The wages and salary for service is He,
If they were to gaze on other than the Beloved,
How could that be love ? that would be idle fancy .
Love is that flame which when is blazes up,
Burns away all except the everlasting Beloved.
It slays " other than God" with the sword of no god .
Look carefully : After no god what remains ?
There remains but God , the rest has gone .
(Mathnawi v / 586).

Another sufi poet, 'Aisha al-Bauniya (d 1516), who is one of the greatest woman poets, was took the idea that used in the following Arabic poem , uses a sublime language :

My love
You are near my heart
Your beauty

Ever present within me
You made union
Last for ever
There was no turning back
No suspicion , no doubt.

(‘Aisha’s Diwan – manuscript copy – p 88-89).

Central to the understanding of the content of sufi poetry that has been reviewed so far in here, is the message of universal fraternity , love and respect for all people.

There fore love and respect for all creation is firmly rooted in the pivotal concept “ the Divine love “.

B- The ascent of the soul (nafs) :

According to a famous Hadith “ who knows his own soul , knows his lord” sufi poets compose their poetry on this Hadith from various perspectives. This tendency mainly reffered as an encouraging for the seeker to manage to know herself/himself so that she/he may come to know God.

Undoubtedly, the expressed aim of sufi poetry is to help the individual to purify his inner self (nafs) through image , metaphor , and music.
When it comes to envisage the soul as something that must be transformed, , some sufi poets , most notably al-Mirtulli al- Andalusi (d 1203) and Ibn al-‘Arabi typically describe the development of the soul, through three stages, basing themselves on the Quranic terminology . firstly , the lowest stage which is the “soul commanding to evil” (al-nafs al-ammarah bi’l-su’) , secondly , which is the next stage the “ blaming soul “ (al-nafs al-lawwamah). The last one which is referred to as the final stage, is “the soul at peace with God ” (al-nafs al-mutmainnah).
Hence , Sufism is vitally concerned with spiritual training of the soul .
On the other hand , in Islamic literature , the human nafs (soul , self) is often used as a trope to symbolize the world and its temptations .As such , it is compared to a woman who , by her ruses , tries to ensure the higher soul (ruh) and bring it down to the level of worldly life. (see, for example, A.M.Schimmel, Mystical dimensions of Islam,1975, p 428-429).

The fact that the Arabic word nafs is feminine makes such a comparison appropriate .
However , in the the Quran nafs has both positive and negative connotations and is not tied directly to gender.
Despite the fact that the nafs as depicted in the Quran has both positive and negative aspects, in later Islamic tradition it takes on an almost exclusively negative character .

C- Poetic imagery :

C – 1 - Poetry and music :

From my own perspective, I believe that the poetry's effect is achieved through imagery , metaphor , and music.
Poetry and music touche the inner sensitivities , spiritual parts of the inner self. They open the person awarness living in the visible world to the realities of the invisible world. In fact , both aim at communicating nonrational levels , since they create nonrational meanings.
As result , the imagery and music of the poem (meter) create in the reader the actual feelings of peace , beauty , and tension .
This shows that sufi poet like a music composer , both trains his voice and ear in the harmony of life .
In order to keep harmony, the sufi trys to form a constant chord of harmony between himself and another .
This harmony , that is, the love of another human being , can be conceived
As a bridge that leads to the love of the Divine.
Now there is a reason to say that poetry and music are used to open the inner self to its own reality , and to its relation to the Divine.

C- 2 – Poetry : Image and metaphor :

Actually , sufi poetry focus on metaphor as a key to the understanding , for it conveys , or creates meanings that are beyond the visible world , touching the emotional , intuitive, morale , and spiritual worlds.
It is with great significance to say that the poetic image of " wine" and " woman " in sufi poetry, is as symbol of the highest reality, the aim of

which is to serve as "a bridge from the visible world to the unseen ". (W.chittick : Jami on Divine love and the image of wine , 1981,p 3).
A case in a point is the poem of the " wine song " (al-Khamriyah) , of the famous Egyptian sufi poet Ibn al-Farid , it creates trough its imagery of "wine" sensibilities that cannot be created using direct terms , because it refers to the Divine love :

Even through love sets out in every one's
Direction, it declares war on and makes peace with no one,
In each lover the wine of love is utterly
Without colour ; the colour derives
From the multi-hued glasses.

(Ibn al-Farid's Diwan , Beirut , p 162 , English trans by A.J.Arberry , 1956).

On this subject , Anne.M.Schimel has pointed out ,two points of view exist concerning the images of wine and sensory love employed by the Persian mystical poets , are neither purely mystical nor purely profane. (A.M.Schimmel , mystical dimension of Islam , 1975, p 288).

However " this mystical dimension take the primary position " as asserted by W.Chittick , the interpretation that I totally agree on . (W. Chittick , Jami on Divine love and the image of wine , p 7) .
Another point must be considered to this subject , with all the previous idea in mind , a very crucial point that must be taken into a consideration which is the fact that the strict moral code of Islamic law (Sharia') would never allow such symbolic image .
In this context , I believe that sufi poetry can be understood as an heretical and dissident spiritual movement that challenged , and was in many instances suppressed by Islamic law (sharia ').

Conclusion :

To conclude , one can wonder what such sufi poetry can bring to the contemporary reader .
The answer can be seen as the fact that the sufi poetry offers a spiritual interpretation of Divine love that binds all people together , despite the differences of religion and culture.
To keep the mystical senses that there are " stages " of reality , these sufi poets remind us that the Divine reality is presented in this world .
The latter is the deeply reflected especially in the human being , the reason why she/he keeps searching and longing for the Divine love that has a strong impact on all levels of life .
There is no doubt that poetry has flourished, and to this day , poetry is very much alive as a major cultural force in nearly every Islamic society, where it plays a much more central role culturally , religiously , and socially than It does in America and in most European countries today.
(see: S.H .Nasr , the Heart of Islam , 2004 , p 231).

Needless to say that the Arab and Persian sufi poetry belongs to the international literature, offer a solution and spititual answers to our contemporary problemes .
Hence, we come to relalize why this Medieval Islamic literary tradition has become so popular among readers in the post modern Western cultures . The translations of the sufi poets Ibn al-'Arabi and Jalalu l-Dine al-Rumi have reached the best sellers lists in the United States .