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Mysticism and the Renewal of Islamic Literature

Tasawuf dan Pembaharuan Kesusasteraan Islam

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Abstract

Literature has been a medium to express and explore the depths of human life and Truth. This is accurate of Islamic literature that has been produced across the globe over hundreds of years. This paper seeks to highlight key mystical aspects of classical Islamic literature and their relevance to world literature and culture. Mysticism is essentially understood in this context as a set of beliefs and practices that lead to a form of proximity or union with the Divine. The paper explores key manifestations of mysticism in prominent works of Islamic literature by renowned classical figures such as Rumi, Ibn ʻArabī, ʾAl-Ghazālī, Ibn ʻAl-Fāriḍ and Rābiʻah. These manifestations include prevalent themes such as divine essence and attributes, gnosis and knowledge, the concept of mystical path and divine love. The paper concludes that contemporary Muslim writers and literary commentators have a rich tradition that can be re-examined, revived and matched to renew and rejuvenate the literatures of Muslim nations.

Keywords: Islamic literature, Mysticism, Mystical literature, Sufism, Sufi poetry.

Abstrak

Kesusasteraan merupakan satu medium untuk menzahir dan meneroka kehidupan manusia dan kebenaran. Ini bertepatan dengan kesusasteraan Islam yang terhasil dari seluruh dunia sejak ratusan tahun dahulu. Makalah ini bertujuan untuk menyoroti aspek tasawuf dalam kesusasteraan Islam klasik dan kaitannya dengan kesusasteraan dan budaya dunia. Tasawuf dalam konteks ini pada asasnya difahami sebagai satu set kepercayaan dan amalan yang membawa kepada suatu bentuk kedekatan atau kesatuan dengan ketuhanan. Makalah ini meneroka manifestasi utama dalam karya-karya kesusasteraan Islam oleh tokoh terkenal seperti Rumi, Ibn 'Arabī,' Al-Ghazali, Ibn 'Al-Fāriḍ dan Rābi'ah. Manifestasi ini termasuk tema lazim seperti intipati dan sifat

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ketuhanan, gnosis dan pengetahuan, konsep tasawuf dan ketuhanan. Makalah ini menyimpulkan bahawa para pengarang Islam kontemporari dan pengulas kesusasteraan telah ditinggalkan dengan tradisi yang kaya untuk dikaji, dihidupkan semula dan dipadankan untuk memperbaharui dan memperkasa kesusasteraan Islam.

Kata Kunci: Kesusasteraan Islam, Tasawuf, Persuratan Tasawuf, Sufism, Puisi sufi.

The Concept of Islamic Literature

The concept of Islamic literature has deep roots since the early days of Arabic literary studies. Critics used to divide the early phases of Arabic literature into pre-Islamic and Islamic. These terms indicated two certain periods before and after the early days of Islam and, to a lesser degree, an evolution in the themes of Arabic literature. Other terms followed to describe the phases of Arabic literature such as Umayyad literature and Abbasid literature. Another use of the concept of Islamic literature, most notably among orientalists, encompasses the works produced in countries of Muslim majorities, be it in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Malay or other languages.[1] Some critics prefer to limit the concept to literary writings that preserve the Islamic perspective or address issues that affect the welfare of Islam and its followers.[2] Regardless of which understanding of Islamic literature one chooses, the mystical dimension has been an essential component of this literature.

An Overview of Mysticism

Much like its ultimate end, the definition of mysticism might prove elusive, as it is a phenomenon that colors a great number of religions, beliefs, and philosophies that date back to times of antiquity. Within the English language, the word has its roots in mystery religions, which were secret Greco-Roman cults or traditions whose initiate was called a "*mystes"*, based on the root meaning of the word "to conceal". In its contemporary sense, the word "mystical" was first used by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in his *Corpus Areopagiticum* or *Corpus Dionysiacum* to indicate a kind of system rather than experience in which

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[1] Adama Bamba, *Islamic Dimensions in the Western African Frncophone Novels: Analytical Study*. (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM thesis manuscript, 2004).

[2] Nasr El Din Ibrahim, *Islamic Literature: Theoretical and Applied Study*. (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM, 2008), 63-76.

God is "absolutely transcendent, beyond reason, thought, intellect and all approaches of mind."[3]

Despite its old roots, the academic study and analysis of the nature of mysticism and the features of the mystical experience across human civilizations only came to prominence in the early days of the twentieth century. The credit for this goes to the famous American scholar, William James, after the publication of his seminal book *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, which comprised his edited *Gifford Lectures* on natural theology that were delivered at the University of Edinburgh in 1901 and 1902.[4] Since then, researchers have put forth numerous definitions that present a general understanding of the multifaceted concept of mysticism.

It must be noted that the contemporary study of mysticism has been shaped by the general worldview that permeated modern human perception, namely that view of science. Scientific approaches have presented new conceptual frameworks based on methods such as observation, experimentation, and falsifiability, which do not readily render themselves to mystical study. Thus, it is believed that scientific ways of understanding the world would replace religion including mystical ways of perceiving truth, and that the growth of one is a factor in the decline of the other.[5] Hence, mysticism can be a polarizing concept, but regardless of whether the focus is on its philosophy, practice or historical formative aspect, its influence remains pervasive across human cultures, and a subject of study in various academic disciplines such as comparative religion, anthropology, and transpersonal psychology.

Modern Definitions of Mysticism

It is important to include some of the inclusive definitions of mysticism to highlight its scope, as well as the central aspects of the mystical practice. Understanding mysticism cannot be separated from understating the nature and features of the mystical experience. One extensive definition is offered by the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*,

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[3] Dagobert D. Runes, *The Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), 203, "Mysticism".

[4] Karel Werner, "Mysticism as Doctrine and Experience", in *The Yogi and the Mystic: Studies in Indian and Comparative Mysticism*, edited by Karel Werner, (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1994), 1-2.

[5] Victoria S. Harrison, *Scientific And Religious Worldviews: Antagonism, Non-Antagonistic Incommensurability and Complementarity*, in *The Heythrop Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 3, (2006), 349-366.

Mysticism, a doctrine or discipline maintaining that one can gain knowledge of reality that is not accessible to sense perception or to rational, conceptual thought. Generally associated with a religious tradition, mysticism can take a theistic form, as it has in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, or a non-theistic form, as it has in Buddhism and some varieties of Hinduism. Mystics claim that the mystical experience, the vehicle of mystical knowledge, is usually the result of spiritual training, involving some combination of prayer, meditation, fasting, bodily discipline, and renunciation of worldly concerns. Theistic varieties of mysticism describe the mystical experience as granted by God and thus not subject to the control of the mystic. Although theists claim to feel closeness to God during the mystical experience, they regard assertions of identity of the self with God as heretical. Non-theistic varieties are more apt to describe the experience as one that can be induced and controlled by the mystic and in which distinctions between the self and reality, or subject and object, are revealed to be illusory. Mystics claim that, although veridical, their experiences cannot be adequately described in language, because ordinary communication is based on sense experience and conceptual differentiation: mystical writings are thus characterized by metaphor and simile. It is controversial whether all mystical experiences are basically the same, and whether the apparent diversity among them is the result of interpretations influenced by different cultural traditions.[6]

The first defining feature of mysticism as a doctrine, then, is access to another world, to the Unseen, which cannot be an object of senses and rationality. Mysticism can either be theistic, believing in a conscious and transcendent Divine Being or non-theistic, believing in an infinite cosmic principle of unity. The mystic experience of the Divine Being or the Cosmic Principle cannot be fully communicated because it exceeds the limits of rational language. Furthermore, this experience, often seen as a result of rigid self-discipline, can either be universal among all mystics or constructed and subject to social environment.

Another definition of mysticism presents a description of this mystical experience as "a (purportedly) super sense-perceptual or sub sense-perceptual experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense perception, soma-

[6] Robert Audi, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, second edition, 1999), 593-594, "Mysticism".

tosensory modalities, or standard introspection."[7] In keeping with scientific norms, this description does not exclude the possibility that mystics do not in reality experience any external truths or states, and that mysticism does not have a foundation in independent reality or objective existence. The definition also defines mysticism by active or meditative discovery or access to an enigmatic truth beyond scientific understanding or the laws of nature.

This is also reflected in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which defines mysticism as the "belief in the possibility of union with the Divine nature by means of ecstatic contemplation; reliance on spiritual intuition as the means of acquiring knowledge of mysteries inaccessible to intellectual apprehension". A disclaimer reminds readers that "from the hostile point of view, mysticism implies self-delusion or dreamy confusion of thought."[8] It can be noted that definitions of mysticism stress two key points. The first is that mysticism revolves around an otherworldly truth that cannot be comprehended or accessed by discursive reasoning. The second point is the experience of Divine Reality, or the process of discovery and disclosure of this truth, which mystics usually express by the metaphor of the Path.

The above definitions present a summary of the concept, which can be expanded upon to realize other dimensions of mysticism. In this manner, Werner sees mysticism as covering three distinct, yet overlapping, areas. Firstly, it covers the experience of unity or communion with the divine in a realm that is beyond human senses and rational thinking. Secondly, it is a theological doctrine that might be established around the experience of mystics. Thirdly, it is a chosen path in life that leads to the mystical subject through stages of self-training and spiritual development.[9] In other words, unity with the divine and spiritual development can form the basis of a theology or a system of belief that is entirely based on the mystical experience and its ramifications. Based on these

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[7] Gellman, Jerome, "Mysticism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL =
< http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism/>.

[8] *Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, second edition), Volume X, 176, "Mysticism".

[9] Karel Werner, "Mysticism as Doctrine and Experience", in *The Yogi and the Mystic: Studies in Indian and Comparative Mysticism*, edited by Karel Werner, (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1994), 2.

definitions and dimensions, mysticism can be understood as religion in its most acute and intense human expression.[10]

Mysticism in Islam

Since mysticism, as a subject of study, is complex and multifaceted, it is pertinent and more feasible to examine at least one of its strands, namely, Islamic mysticism. This examination allows for a deeper understanding of the development and dimensions of this strand, which can, by extension and analogy, shed some light on other mystical traditions and their implications.

The mystical constituent in Islam has been historically known as *taṣawwuf*. This term has been used to indicate Islamic mysticism since the second century of Islam.[11] Trying to crystalize its essence, a definition offered by Henry Corbin of Islamic mysticism or *taṣawwuf* encapsulates it as "the realization of the Prophet's spiritual message, the attempt to live the modalities of this message in a personal way through the interiorization of the content of the Quranic Revelation."[12] This definition stresses the orthodoxy of Islamic mysticism within the original framework of Islam.

Leaman and Ali posit that Islamic mysticism is "highly systemized" and mainly defined by two key usages. The first is the "esoteric philosophic which seeks to explore the inner dimension or essence of reality." The second is the "practical spiritual exercises to instill habits of piety and to develop the continual consciousness of God."[13] Thus, there is the Truth (*ḥaqīqah*) and the Way (*tarīqah*), which form the system of Islamic mysticism in theory and practice.

An Overview of Islamic Mysticism

The mystical dimension of Islam has been traditionally known in the West as Sufism,[14] and the terms Islamic mysticism and Sufism have

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[10] Dagobert D. Runes, *The Dictionary of Philosophy*, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), 203, "Mysticism".

[11] Muḥammad Khafājī, *'Al-'Adab fī 'Al-Turāth 'Al-Ṣūfī*, (Cairo, Gharīb Books, 1983), 14.

[12] Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, (London: Kegan Paul International, 1993), 187.

[13] Oliver Leaman and Kecia Ali, *Islam: Key Concepts*. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 134.

[14] Or Sufismus, Sufismo, Soufisme, Sufizm, Soefisme, etc. depending on the European language.

been used as synonyms in English. The English word *Sufi*, meaning a Muslim mystic, is borrowed from the Arabic *Sufi*.

Various relevant and interesting interpretations have been put forth regarding the etymology of *Ṣūfī* in Arabic, mostly based on its trilateral root *ṣūf*. Some have asserted that the word stems from the practice of wearing wool garments by early Muslim ascetics, while others believe it is based on *ṣaf* meaning row or rank, and that mystics occupy the first row or rank in Islam, *'al-ṣaf 'al-'awwal*. Others believe the origin to be based on *'ahl 'al-ṣuffah*, people of the bench. These were a group of Prophet Muhammad's Companions who were noted for their poverty and devotion, and who occupied a certain bench in the first mosque in Medina. Another possible origin is the word *ṣafā*, which means purity, indicating the purity of a mystic's heart.

It was also suggested that the word *ṣūfī* comes from Greek *sophos*, which means wise.[15] This etymology alludes to Sufism's alien origin as Islam's strict law and transcendental God do not leave much space for a creative mystical dimension. In contrast, the etymologies mentioned earlier stress the deep ties of Sufism to the First Generation[16] of Islam and ascetic self-discipline.

Islamic Mysticism and the Quran

Proponents of Islamic mysticism not only believe that it is steeped in the practice of the First Generation, but that it is more importantly rooted in the foundational texts of Islam. Thus, it has been proposed that Sufism is as old as Islam itself. In this sense, Quranic verses are God's "Self-revelation to mankind" and "mystical texts that are the chief encouragement and justification of the Sufi in his belief".[17]

Arberry lists some of these verses that carry profound mystical implications and had immense role in the theoretical foundations of Sufism, such as "If My servants enquire of thee concerning Me, lo, I am near"[18], and "We are nearer to him than his jugular vein"[19], with the

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[15] Annemarie Schimmel. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 14.

[16] Companions or First Generation of Muslims are highly regarded as the most devout and closest to the example of the Prophet. This is based on various traditions such as a hadith in *Sahih al-Bukhari*, "The people of my generation are the best, then those who follow them, and then those who follow the latter."

[17] Arthur John Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam*, (London: Routledge, 2008), 16-18.

[18] Al-Baqarah [2:186]

greatly celebrated verse "Whithersoever ye turn, there is the Face of God."[20]

The Quran has not only given Islamic mysticism its theoretical or legal foundations, it has also provided Sufism with its key tenets and motifs. Some of the most celebrated verses by Sufis stand both as a testimony to the mystic doctrine and as the source of the concept of Divine Illumination,

God is the Light of the heavens and of the earth. His Light is like a niche wherein is a lamp, the lamp encased in glass, the glass as it were a glistening star. From a blessed tree it is lighted, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West whose oil well nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it; Light upon Light; God guides to His Light whom He will. And God strikes similitudes for men, and God has knowledge of everything. In temples God has allowed to be raised up, and His Name to be commemorated therein; therein glorifying Him, in the mornings and the evenings, are men whom neither commerce nor trafficking diverts from the remembrance of God and to perform the prayer, and to pay the alms, fearing a day when hearts and eyes shall be turned about, that God may recompense them for their fairest works and give them increase of His bounty; and God provides whomsoever He will, without reckoning.[21]

Countless commentaries were written on these verses by leading mystics: 'Al-Ghazālī wrote an exegetic book titled *The Niche of Light*. In this book, 'Al-Ghazālī applies the concept of Divine Illumination through physical and metaphorical lights to the eye, intellect, prophets, supernal beings, and ultimately to "Allah Himself, who is shown to be not the only source of light and of these lights, but also the only real actual light in all existence."[22] Suhrawardi, in *Philosophy of Illumination*, offers a complex emanationist light ontology. In it, the cosmos is an uninterrupted overflow in a descending and diminishing manner from the immaterial light of the Light of Lights.[23] Ibn 'Atā' Allah (d. 922), on the other hand, sees the verse as highlighting the relation between "the macrocosm of the

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[19] Qaf [50:16]
[20] Al-Baqarah [2:115]
[21] An-Nur [24:35-38]
[22] William Henry Temple Gairdner, *The Niche for Lights by Al-Ghazzali: Translation and Introduction*, (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1924), 2-3.
[23] Marcotte, Roxanne, "Suhrawardi", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/suhrawardi/>.
These views proved controversial, yet influential, throughout Islamic history.

heavens and the microcosm of the soul". Thus, both mystic gnosis and discursive reasoning are reliant upon varying degrees of Divine Light. In a symbolic reading 'Abū Sa'īd 'Al-Kharrāz (d. 891) saw the light as a simile to Prophet Muhammad who is "light from His light, upon His light, and in His light". [24]

Islamic Mysticism: Self-Discipline and Asceticism

Nicholson believes that Sufism started in the early days of Islam not as a mystical trend, but rather as a form of asceticism and quietism. This is based on the fact that awareness of the gravity of sin and fear of divine punishment were a defining feature of the early days of Islam, given the strong language of the Quran in describing the torments of the Afterlife and the examples set forth by the Prophet in this regard. Combined with the belief in fate and the absolute will of Allah as a cornerstone of Islamic creed, this fear of sin and punishment led to a recourse to quietism and asceticism in the quest for salvation.[25] These were the seeds from which mystical aspects of Islam came to full bloom in the second Islamic century with the likes of Hasan of Basra and Rābi'ah.

Additionally, the expansion of the newly-established Muslim caliphate in both geographical and cultural terms brought new found wealth and ways of life that were alien to the modest and earnest beginnings of Islam. This undoubtedly affected Muslim societies and Sufism—stressing the life of austerity—first came to prominence as individual reactions to these changes. Sufis fortified their negative view of this change in strong Quranic admonishments such as, "O mankind, indeed the promise of Allah is truth, so let not the worldly life delude you and be not deceived about Allah by the Deceiver."[26]

A number of sayings by the Prophet also served as a strong background to the new Sufi call. One example is the hadith narrated by 'Abū Sa'īd 'Al-Khudrī, "the Messenger of Allah sat on the pulpit and we sat around him. He said: 'What I am concerned most is the flourishment and the beauty of this world will be available to you'". [27] This was reinforced by the examples set by the First Generation, such as that of 'Anas who told some of the Followers, "You indulge in actions which are more in-

[24] Gerhard Bowering, "The Light Verse: Quranic Text and Sufi Interpretation", *Oriens*, Vol. 36, (2001), 113-144, refer to 133-134.
[25] Reynold A. Nicholson. *The Mystics of Islam*, (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2002), 3.
[26] Fatir [35:5].
[27] Riyadh al-Salihin, Book 1, Hadith 458.

significant to you than a hair while we considered them at the time of Messenger of Allah to be great destroying sins".[28]

Accordingly, in the new urban centers of the Islamic world, namely Basra and Baghdad, Islamic mysticism began to flourish as a distinct doctrine. During this period, somber followers began to circle scholars such as Hasan of Basra, whom one would never see "without thinking that he had just been afflicted with a terrible tragedy" and who famously said, "Renunciation of this world is that you loathe its followers and everything that it contains."[29]

Following Hasan, a number of seminal mystical figures flourished in Baghdad, such as *Ma'rūf 'Al-Karkhī* (d.815), and *'Al-Muḥāsibī* (d. 857), whose mysticism relied on two cornerstones: self-examination and "readiness to bear the worst hardships or calamities for the sake of God" and *'Abū 'Al-Qāsim 'Al-Junayd* (d. 911), who had a great and enduring effect on the development of mysticism in later times, with his stress on the transcendence and unity of God, and importance of the Primordial Covenant as the model for the relationship between God and man.[30]

Islamic Mysticism as a School of Thought

A wave of scholarly awareness in which various manuals and guidelines were penned about the belief, doctrine, and formal practices of Islamic mysticism followed with monumental works such as *The Revival of the Sciences of Religion*, and *Epistle on Sufism* by 'Al-Ghazālī and 'Al-Qushayrī respectively. Again, the motive behind these works was partly a reaction to the perceived decline in the religiosity of Muslim society, as aptly summarized by the title of 'Al-Ghazālī's book and in the following lines of 'Al-Qushayrī's,

Know – may God show mercy to you! – that the majority of those true Sufis have become extinct and, in our age, nothing is left of them but their traces... Scrupulosity has disappeared from this world and rolled up its prayer rug, whereas greed has gained strength and tightened its stranglehold. Respect for the Divine Law has departed from the hearts of men and they have chosen the neglect of religion as their support and rejected the difference between the permissible and the forbidden. They have

[28] Riyadh al-Salihin, Book 1, Hadith 63.
[29] 'Al-Qushayrī, *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism*, (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 2007).
[30] Majid Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism: A Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 73-74.

made disrespect and shamelessness their religion. They have set no store in the devotional acts and become remiss in fasting and praying; they have galloped around in the field of neglectfulness and leaned toward those who blindly follow their lusts. They have thought little about committing sinful deeds. At the same time, they have availed themselves freely of the things they borrow from the commoners, women and rulers.[31]

It can be argued that these scholarly mystics were fusing fully evolved aspects of Islamic scholarship such as jurisprudence and theology with the teachings of the mystic path in order to methodically establish mysticism as the true expression of Islam and the salvation of Muslim society. These works were infused with profound philosophical concepts which is evident in the books of Ibn ʻArabī. As such, Islamic mysticism developed with time into a school of thought and a movement, instead of a call of personal and societal reformation. This change was completed with the establishment of its "practical collective form of fraternities" such as the Rifāʻī, Mawlawī, Badawī, and Shādhilī orders, each named after its founder.[32]

Accordingly, the role of Islamic mysticism in Islamic civilization is evident in the countless number of works left as part and parcel of the Islamic heritage across the globe from India to Andalusia. Islamic mysticism has left a wealth of great works, written in many languages, to attest to the importance of this phenomenon. Few Muslim writers can claim an influence as profound as that of great mystics such as ʻAl-Ghazālī and Ibn ʻArabī.

Divine Essence and Attributes in Islamic Mystical Literature

The essence and attributes of God have been a key theme of mystical poetry, reflecting the complexity and richness of mystical experience and knowledge. Accordingly, the theological distinction between Divine Essence and Divine Names was reflected in mystical poetry. Unlike the Attributes, the Essence is indefinable. This was expressed by *Mawlana Rumi* in the *Diwan of Shams*, "Since you have not the endurance for His Essence, turn your eyes toward the Attributes. Since you do

[31] ʻAl-Qushayrī, Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism, (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 2007), 2-3.
[32] Majid Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy*, *Theology and Mysticism: A Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 82.

not see the Directionless, behold His light in the directions."[33] The gist of these lines is not only a reflection upon the Essence and Attributes, but also an advice for the traveler on the mystic path and the seeker of gnosis. Divine Attributes are reflected in the universe, forming a key part of the way of mystical knowledge. Rumi reiterates this through the famous Hidden Treasure metaphor,

The universe was created for the sake of manifestation, in order that the Treasure of Wisdom might not remain hidden.

He said, "I was a Hidden Treasure". Listen! Do not lose touch with your own substance, make yourself manifest![34]

In these lines, Rumi expressed various mystical concepts such as the ineffability of Divine Essence, the importance of Divine Attributes on the path of gnosis, the concept of Divine Light and Manifestations and the cosmos as a mirror that reflect Them, and the Divine Will that created the cosmos for gnosis. In short, a mystical theology and a mystical ontology that stress the importance of the spiritual path are highlighted.

Unity of Being and Unity of Manifestation

Other key themes expressed through poetry and prose includes the concepts of Unity of Being/Manifestation. This has been most famously attributed to Husayn Ibn Mansūr 'Al-Ḥallāj, a leading figure in Islamic mysticism. 'Al-Ḥallāj once opined in a well-known short poem, "I have seen my Lord (rabbi) with the eye of my heart, and I said: 'who are you?' He Said: 'You.'"[35] 'Al-Ḥallāj was ultimately executed due to his beliefs in 922 in Baghdad, in what became a well-document and dramatic episode in the history of mystical struggle against orthodoxy and the state.

The concept of Unity of Unity/Manifestation was also a hallmark of the writings of Ibn 'Arabī, in both his extended prose treatises such as *The Meccan Revelations* and in his poetry such as these lines.

I wonder at the existent who embraces all the forms,

Of the celestial beings as well as those of the genii and the men,

Including the lower and higher worlds, animals, plants, and stones.

They are neither other than Him, nor His Identity.

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[33] William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 44.
[34] William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 48.
[35] Herbert W. Mason, *Al-Hallaj*, (London, Routledge, 1995), 71.

But He manifests Himself in everything He wills.
He is visible for the sight in respect of His essence.[36]

Mysticism of Knowledge/Gnosis

In Islamic mysticism, a key work of spiritual autobiography[37] comes from 'Al-Ghazālī (c.1058–1111), a dominant figure in the harmonization of mysticism and established religious law. Although separated by a few centuries and coming from different civilizations, both 'Al-Ghazālī and Augustine have contributed profoundly to the development of the tradition of intellectual mysticism. In his autobiography, *Deliverance from Error*, 'Al-Ghazālī details the paths that men follow to know the Truth,

When God by His grace and abundant generosity cured me of this disease[38], I came to regard the various seekers (sc. after truth) as comprising four groups:

(I) the Theologians, who claim that they are the exponents of thought and intellectual speculation;

(2) the *Batiniyah*, who consider that they, as the party of `authoritative instruction' (ta'lim), alone derive truth from the infallible imam;

(3) the Philosophers, who regard themselves as the exponents of logic and demonstration;

(4) the Sufis or Mystics, who claim that they alone enter into the `presence' (sc. of God), and possess vision and. intuitive understanding.

I said within myself: `The truth cannot lie outside these four classes. These are the people who tread the paths of the quest for truth...

When I had finished with these sciences, I next turned with set purpose to the method of mysticism (or Sufism). I knew that the complete mystic `way' includes both 'intellectual belief and practical activity.[39]

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[36] S. H. Nadeem, *A Critical Appreciation of Arabic Mystical Poetry*, (Delhi: Adam Publishers, 1993), 144.

[37] William James noted when commenting on this book of 'Al-Ghazālī that the library of Islamic mysticism does not offer a great number of autobiographies, unlike that of Christendom. James's definitive study of mysticism is greatly based on autobiographies, which he believes represent the "the undiluted ascetic spirit".

[38] The disease refers to intellectual skepticism and the denial of the possibility of knowledge.

[39] Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali*, (Oxford: One World, 2000), 24, 56.

Al-Ghazālī's adoption of the mystical path resulted in ten years of search, solitude and retirement. Finally, this led him to declare that mystic knowledge is based on that of theology, yet transcends it, and that Islamic mysticism does not tolerate antinomianism[40] and should not contravene theological and jurisprudential principles. This work, *Deliverance from Error*, by one of the most influential jurists, theologians, logicians, and mystics of Islam, is more than an autobiography for it represents a profound scholarly analysis of spiritual growth[41] and an excellent example of intellectual mysticism. It also presents a concise, yet erudite, examination of the scholarly discourse of the period including epistemology and metaphysics.

Modern readers might find phrases such as "intellectual mysticism" hard to understand,[42] counterintuitive, or oxymoronic, due to the association of mysticism with excessive emotions or occultism. However, due to the influence of such great mystics such as Al-Ghazālī and Augustine, this has not always been the case. Their presentation of discursive knowledge as a framework for intuitive awareness and an immediate sense of God stands as a firm foundation of intellectual mysticism. While subjective in many respects, these autobiographies have become theological manifestos of mysticism, exciting the interest of the public and dispelling adversarial or depreciating views regarding the robustness and stability of the foundations of mysticism.

The Way/Path of Mystics

Another important theme of mystical literature is that of the path that leads to the Divine, which signifies methods and actions undertaken to achieve spiritual goals. Schimmel states that "mystics in every religious tradition have tended to describe the different steps on the way that leads toward God by the image of the Path."[43] In Islamic mysticism, *ṭarīqah* or path refers both to the spiritual path and the "manner of traveling (*sulūk*) along this path" through the different spiritual stages and sta-

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[40] relating to the view that some are released by grace from the obligation of observing the moral law (Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 11th Edition).

[41] Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali*, (Oxford: One World, 2000), 10.

[42] Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 69.

[43] Annemarie Schimmel. Mystical Dimensions of Islam. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 98.

tions.[44] It is not a question of whether a mystic travels the path or not, for the path in itself is inevitable. Rather, it is a question of whether the mystic will reach the destination or perish on the way for, according to William of St. Thierry (1085-1148), "it is permitted to no man long to remain in the same state, but always the servant of God must needs advance, or else fall away; either he striveth upwards or he is driven downwards."[45]

One of the greatest works of world literature that masterfully illustrates aspects of the mystical path is the symbolic epic of the twelfth-century Persian poet, Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*. It is his most famous poem, with numerous colorful stories and anecdotes. Essentially, Attars presents a group of birds who, in search of their King, undertake a long and arduous journey,

They saw the bow of this great enterprise
Could not be drawn by weakness, sloth or lies,
And some were so cast down that then and there
They turned aside and perished in despair.
The remnant rose up ready to depart.
They travelled on for years; a lifetime passed
Before the longed-for goal was reached at last.
What happened as they flew I cannot say,
But if you journey on the narrow Way,
Then you will act as they once did and know
The miseries they had to undergo.
Of all the army that set out, how few
Survived the Way; of that great retinue
A handful lived until the voyage was done—
Of every thousand there remained but one….
A world of birds set out, and there remained
But thirty when the promised goal was gained,
Thirty exhausted, wretched, broken things,
With hopeless hearts and tattered, trailing wings
Who saw that nameless Glory which the mind

[44] Lindsay Jones, ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion*. (Detroit: Macmillan/Thomson Gale, 2005), 9003, "Ṭarīqah"
[45] Patrick Grant, *Literature of Mysticism in Western Tradition*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1985), 146.

Acknowledges as ever-undefined.[46]

Attar of Nishapur allegorically represents the spiritual journey of mystics through the flight of birds through treacherous challenges. The birds select the Hoopoe, who leads them on a quest to find, pay homage and pledge allegiance to their King, Simurgh. The birds encounter numerous perils and trials on their journey, crossing seven symbolic valleys. The valleys are those of Search, Love, Knowledge, Detachment, Unification, Bewilderment, and Annihilation. Many of the travelers abandon this spiritual enterprise before it begins and many perish on the way, which represents human weakness, and the tendency towards comfort and indulgence.

Of all the travelers, only thirty reach their destination. These undergo death and resurrection to find that they and Simurgh are one, forming One Being. This represents the path of the mystic, where he annihilates his self and is consumed with love as a prelude to entering "into union with the Divine, [whence] the part becomes one with the Whole, and the One in all becomes the One and All."[47]

Divine Love in Mystical Literature

Perhaps the epitomizing theme of mystical literature is that of divine love. Divine love and the mystic experience in general are inextricably intertwined and the same can be true of divine love and mystical literature. It must be noted that although divine love is the highest form of transcendental love, it is nevertheless "modeled after human relationships." This is because it is initially founded upon a human experience and ultimately represented by metaphors drawn from the human environment.[48] In any case, love is the woof and warp of the mystical path and the expression of divine love is the ultimate personal expression in mystical literature.

The earliest verses of Islamic mysticism were about love, and are ascribed to Rābiʿah of Basra (d. 801) who spoke of her absolute love to God that is unaffected by reward of Heaven or punishment of Hell. Schimmel believes that her verses are more distinguished by the strong

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[46] Sara Sviri, "Mysterium Coniunctionis: From Polarity to Oneness in Sufi Psychology", in *Jung and the Monotheisms: Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, edited by Joel Ryce-Menuhin, (London: Routledge, 1994), 192-194.

[47] Margaret Smith, *The Persian Mystics: Attar*, (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1932), 26-33.

[48] Yudit Kornberg Greenberg (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions,* (Santa Barbra: ABC-CLIO, 2008), Volume 1, XXVIII.

feelings they express rather than their artistic quality; however, these lines paved the way of love for other poet mystics in the Islamic tradition,

Two ways 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 adorning gaze.
Not mine the praise in that or this,
Thine is the praise in both, I wis.[49]

These and similar lines of Rābi'ah have endured through centuries and are cited in numerous books of mystical literature, mostly due to the intensity and uniqueness of the experience they represent. Their poetic expression of divine love as the all-consuming meaning of this world is best elaborated by Rābi'ah's own prayers, "O God! If I worship Thee in fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not Thine everlasting beauty!"[50] The rejection of heaven and hell as motivators for devout behavior might not be customary in any orthodox discourse. Rābi'ah seeks to convey the purity of unadulterated love as the ultimate value that distinguishes the mystical path.

A more famous and highly regarded work in mystical literature on divine love is the *Wine Ode* of Ibn 'Al-Fāriḍ. According to Homerin, this ode can be readily understood as a panegyric of wine and a classic love poem between a man and a woman; however, its subtle meaning lies deeper in its shroud of mysticism to hint to the mystic's burning love for the Divine,

In Memory of the beloved/ We drank a wine;
We were drunk with it/ Before creation of the vine.
The full moon its cup, the wine/ A sun circled by a crescent;
When it is mixed,/ How many stars appear!
If not for its bouquet,/ I would not have found its tavern;
If not for its flashing gleams,/Could imagination picture it?

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[49] Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 17-18.
[50] Reynold A. Nicholson. *The Mystics of Islam*, (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2002), 82.

Time preserved nothing of it/ Save one last breath,
Concealed like a secret/ In the breasts of the wise.
But if it is recalled among the tribe,/ The worthy ones
Are drunk by morn/ Without shame or sin.
From the depths of the jars/ It arose, though truly,
Nothing of it remained / Save a name.
Yet if one day/ It crosses a man's mind,
Then joy will dwell in him/ And anxiety depart.
And could they sprinkle it/ On a dead man's earth,
The spirit would return to him, /His body revived.
It refines the morals/ of the tavern mates
and by it, the irresolute are guided/ to resolution's path;
One who never knew it/ is moved by its memory,
just as one longing for Nu`um/ is stirred when she's recalled.
While it made me drunk/ before my birth,
abiding always with me/ though my bones be worn away.
It never dwells with anxiety/ at any time or place,
just as sorrow/ never lives with song.
Be drunk with it, / if only the life of an hour,
and you will see time a willing slave/ under your command.
For there is no life in this world/ for one who lives here sober;
who does not die drunk on it,/ prudence has passed him by.
So let him weep for himself,/ one whose life was wasted,
never having won a share/ or measure of this wine.[51]

These lines are noted for their consistent uses of symbols to express hidden mystic meanings. For instance, Ibn 'Al-Fāriḍ uses symbolic wine to refer to divine love, alluding to the covenant with God in pre-eternity by intoxication before the formation of grapevine. The heart of the mystic as a receptacle for divine manifestations is presented through the images of sun and moon. More acutely, the full moon is the Perfect Man, while the new moon is the mystic who has not achieved this exalted status. The poet laments the loss of unity with the divine, as the old wine is now a secret preserved in the hearts of a few worthy men of God. The miracles of divine love are expounded in a few lines, expressing the ecstasy and elation it emanates and the bereavement and sorrow of those who miss it.

[51] Thomas Emil Homerin, *Umar Ibn 'Al-Fāriḍ: Sufi Verse, Saintly Life*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 52-65.

Conclusion

There are diverse vantage points to look at mysticism as a field of academic study. For the purpose of a delimited literary examination, mysticism can be taken in essence as a set of beliefs and practices that lead to a form of union with the Divine. This experience of unity with the divine is beyond rational thinking and is often ecstatic. It is reached by Divine Grace through a dedicated path in life that focus on arduous self-discipline and various devotional practices. This was reflected in classical Islamic mysticism, which focuses on gnosis and union with God by following a spiritual teacher on a path of practical self-purification. Throughout Islamic literary history, poets and writers across the world have expressed these mystical experiences and attitudes and their underlying theological concepts. This leaves contemporary writers and critics with a rich heritage that can be studied, promoted, and emulated to ensure the revival of this indispensable aspect of Islamic literature.

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