Sufism in the Works of Arab-American Writers: Mikhail Naimy and Khalil Gibran

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Abstract

Sufism – anchored firmly in the Quran – through capitalisation on the knowledge of inner experience, enlarges man's claims and holds out the prospect of nothing less than a direct vision of Reality. It is the principle aspect in the literary works of Mikhail Naimy and Khalil Gibran: two prominent writers within the rich tapestry of Arab immigrant literature that emerged in the early 20th century in the United States. Writings of these men of letters express Sufism as a unique intellectual tradition capable of blending the ideas drawn from both Eastern and Western cultures and philosophies harmoniously. This fusion allows them to reconnoitre universal themes of love, existence, and the human condition, and amplifies the resonance of their reflections to a broader audience. Wise thoughts, deeply inspired by Sufi ideology, flowed abundantly through the pens of these distinguished thinkers, which is equally evident in their prose and poetry. Mikhail Naimy's 'The Book of Mirdad' delved into the journey of self-discovery, and his 'Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul' portrays the existential struggles of the wandering spirit. Likewise, Khalil Gibran's 'Sand and Foam' is a collection of poetic aphorisms that touches on the intricacies of life and spirituality. A subtle influence of Sufism is mirrored in these master pieces from the Arab immigrant literature. These works also attest authors' profound quest for society's enlightenment through the self-realisation of each individual.

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Sufism in the Works of Arab-American Writers

Since the birth of Islam, innumerable great thinkers and writers have been using the channels of prose and poetry across the Orient and Occident to express the profound truths of Sufism. The eminent literary critic and scholar Azade Rustamova has aptly described Sufism as the quintessence of Islamic teachings that has been deeply influencing the intellectual landscape of the Eastern world, guiding artistic expression for centuries and inspiring the creative endeavours of countless artists across various media. She observes,

> Sufism in Islam comes from within, from the heart - a process of spiritual enlightenment that embraces the seeker intuitively, morally, and spiritually. It represents a unique religio-philosophical perspective which realises the potential for direct communication with Allah through the actualisation of inner purity. Most importantly, this mystical understanding profoundly inspires individuals to recognize and embrace their inherent divine origin, that fosters a deeper connection with the universe and a sense of belonging to something greater than themselves. (Azada, 2005)

Sufism stands at the forefront of assimilating Eastern culture and philosophical thought into the tapestry of global humanitarian ideals, significantly enriching the foundations of Western civilisation. This profound tradition not only embodies a kaleidoscope of wisdom but also fosters an invaluable connection between Eastern and Western cultures. With its extensive and inspiring resources, Sufism presents a compelling worldview that resonates deeply across borders. Historically, one may see a tinge of Platonism, Buddhism, Shamanism, and Judaism on the exterior intricate weave of Sufism, but in reality, as Azade Rustamova compellingly asserts, this philosophical treasure is not merely a confluence of ideas; rather, it emerges directly from the heart of Islam, serving as a beacon of mystical understanding and representing a unique gnostic pathway within the Islamic tradition. We ought to embrace the

rich legacy of Sufism and recognize its pivotal role in bridging the cultures. Together, let us explore and celebrate the wisdom that transcends time and geography, and fosters unity and understanding in our increasingly interconnected world. Let us join this journey towards deeper insight and harmony today!

A clear example of these aspects can be seen in the works of key figures in Arab immigrant literature in the United States, produced during the early 20th century. Notably, Sufism played a significant role in the works of Lebanese-American writers Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883-1931) and Mikhail Naimy (1889-1988). These thinkers viewed Sufism as a bridge between Eastern and Western literature, philosophy, and religious beliefs. Their Christian backgrounds, along with their knowledge of Islamic teachings and Eastern philosophy, allowed them to articulate their thoughts through Sufism, which encompasses shared features of the global idealist thought system. Sufism served as a central source that unified Islam, Christianity, Indian religious philosophy, and both Eastern and Western philosophies in the works of these Arab immigrant writers.

The pursuit of a unified understanding of spirituality that transcends cultural and religious boundaries has long been a focal point in literary and philosophical discourse. This quest for truth resonates within various traditions, as mystics from diverse backgrounds explore the paths to divine connection. In this context, scholars have examined the intricate parallels between Christian mysticism, particularly the threefold division of *via purgativa*, *via contemplativa*, and *via illuminata*, and the Islamic framework of *sharia*, *tariqa*, and truth (*haqiqa*). This intersection is pivotal in understanding the universal quest for spiritual enlightenment, as articulated in the writings of Mikhail Naimy.

Mikhail Naimy, a prominent figure of the early 20th century literary renaissance in Lebanon, reflects the deeply intertwined narratives of Sufism within his acclaimed works, including 'The Book of Mirdad,' 'Khalil Gibran,' and 'Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul.' In these texts, Naimy manifests a synthesis of philosophical teachings grounded in Sufi thought, echoing the sentiments of mystics seeking to illuminate the path toward the divine. The metaphor of the 'road' is particularly significant,

as highlighted by Naimy's reflections on the challenges of spiritual ascension,

> We are all on the Road. But the path is full of pain, snares are set on the path, and roaring passions overshadow it. But the spirit of God is upon it, and the light of God pierces the fog that covers it. (Naimy, 1985)

This imagery encapsulates the transformative journey toward self-discovery and God-realization, inviting readers to navigate the turbulence of human experience with a divine perspective.

Furthermore, the multifaceted nature of 'Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul' is indicative of Naimy's literary innovation, as noted by his brother and researcher Nadim Nuayma. He describes the text as a blend of detective novel, philosophical dissertation, allegory, and autobiography, unified through the lens of poetic symbolism that culminates in Sufism (Nadeem, 1967). This intermingling of genres not only enriches the narrative texture but also reflects the complex interplay of personal and universal themes in Naimy's exploration of spiritual truths.

Naimy's contributions to literature and mysticism serve as vital touchstones for understanding the broader implications of Sufism in modern thought. His ability to weave intricate philosophical ideas into accessible narratives resonates with contemporary readers and offers a profound commentary on the eternal quest for enlightenment. This literature review highlights the significance of Naimy's works in enhancing our comprehension of Sufism and its relevance in fostering a spiritually unified human experience.

The examination of Mikhail Naimy's writings reveals a deep-rooted connection to Sufism's philosophical principles, with an emphasis on the journey toward self-realization amid worldly challenges. Through the blending of various literary forms and rich symbolic language, Naimy articulates a vision of spiritual continuity that transcends cultural barriers and invites collective exploration of the divine.

First published in 1948, the allegorical book of philosophy 'The Book of Mirdad', depicts the struggles to climb the painful and difficult path to the top of the altar in order to get the Book of Mirdad. This work

resonates with ideas from Islam, Christianity and the ancient Indian beliefs. The term 'road' originates from Sufism and represents the 'journey of the soul' (*tariqa*) in the mortal world. The Sufi scholarship contemplates the realisation of man's success in the voyage through this world on a right road (*sirat-i-mustaqeem*). The *salik* (traveller) in his *suluk* (walking on the road) will have to pass from various challenges until he reaches the goal of monotheism, the existential explanation that expresses the unity of God (Schimmel, 2000). The road described by Naimy in the work is, first of all, the road of Sufism. This road goes through the thick and thin but ultimately leads the disciples to perfection by saving them from the shackles of the mortal world. The main Sufi point in the disciple's progress against the desires of the soul is clearly expressed in the 'The Book of Mirdad', "... as the jagged Shavan slope slid under my feet, fearful sounds like the moans of millions of mouths filled the surroundings. I had to use my hands and knees to walk a little further" (Naimy, 1993).

Khalil Gibran's ideas about the sacred path leading to divine status in his book 'Sand and Foam' attract attention for their originality,

> On my way to the holy city, I met a pilgrim on the road. I asked him, 'Is this road straight to the Holy City?"
>
> He said: 'Come, let's go with me. We will get there in one day and one night.'
>
> I went with him. We travelled day and night, but we still did not reach the Holy City. I was very surprised by something. He was angry with me because he showed me the wrong way. (Gibran, 2000)

In one of his aphorisms, Gibran writes that he condemned his self seven times, and he says that one of them was 'The third time, when he had to choose between comfort and pain, he chose comfort (Gibran, 2000).

Along with this, Sufism points such as giving up the love of material world, repentance, hunger, eating less, trust, poverty, patience, and gratitude are also reflected in the novel 'The Book of Mirdad.'

Naimy's works originate from the Sufi thought of 'die before dying' (Schimmel, 2000), emphasising on saving the soul from the entertainments of the mortal world and rising to the stage of enlightenment. It is no coincidence that in the 'Protection of the Book' part of the novel 'The Book of Mirdad', Shamadi told the narrator who had climbed to the top, "Now look, you are more alive than me. You died to live!" (Naimy, 1993). In his work 'Khalil Gibran', Naimy highlights the way to perfection for a person through keeping away from material wants. He says,

> The only glory of a person is that he gradually rises from his inner humanity to divinity, from temporary to permanent, from ugliness to beauty, from fantasy to truth, from the dual appearance of life to the inner unity of life. (Naimy, 1985)

The idea of inner unity of life in Naimy's views also corresponds to Sufism's teaching of the unity of existence. We also see this aspect in the works of Khalil Gibran. In one of the aphorisms included in his book 'Sand and Foam', Gibran writes,

> They tell me when I am awake: You and the world you live in are actually grains of sand on the endless shores of the endless sea.
>
> And I answer them in my dreams that, 'I am the same endless sea, and all the worlds are grains of sand on my shore'. (Gibran, 2000)

The image of Mirdad also shows a person who reached the perfect stage of enlightenment in terms of morality. In Türkiye, they say:

> Sharia: Yours is yours, mine is mine.
>
> Sect: Yours is yours and mine is mine.
>
> Morality: There is no such thing as mine or yours (Schimmel, 2000).

According to the Sufi worldview, the differences and separations between people melt and disappear within the profound unity of Allah, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings. This perspective highlights the idea that individual identities are illusions, inevitably dissolve in the divine essence. Although the concept of self in Mirdad's thoughts originates from the notion of 'I' presented in the 'Bhagavad-

Gita,' which reflects ancient Indian beliefs about the self and its relationship to the universe, it is not excluded from the Sufi worldview. Mirdad articulates this connection when he states,

> O monks, because the word 'I' is a perfect word. As long as you do not understand that mysterious power in it and are not masters of that power, your wealth means poverty; and your peace means war (Nuayma, 2009),

suggesting that true understanding of self leads to enlightenment and harmony.

Similarly, Gibran Khalil Gibran echoes this sentiment in his book 'Sand and Foam,' where he writes,

> Yesterday I considered myself a particle moving out of harmony in the sphere of life. Even today, I understand that that sphere is me, and the life itself in these harmonious particles moves inside me. (Gibran, 2000)

This reflection illustrates a transformative journey toward recognizing the unity of existence and the intrinsic connection between the self and the universe, a core tenet shared between Sufism and Eastern philosophies.

In 'Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul,' the hero titles his diary 'From Myself to Myself,' symbolizing those who have shed their worldly ties to unite with God. Argash, who obstructed his soul's ascension and suppressed his material self in the presence of a beautiful woman, reflects on his past. He recognizes the profound divide between the persona he once embodied and his current self, which seeks solitude and 'the great truth.' As noted, "He killed the worldly Argash of the past, allowing a new, purified Argash to emerge" (Naimy, 1952). Argash's journey aligns with the Sufi concept of *faqr*, which emphasizes that this state signifies closeness to truth and is essential for the purity of soul. Thus, a servant's plea in the realm of *faqr* surpasses that of a worldly ruler, as the path through *faqr* leads to true justice (Göyüşov, 1997).

Along with Islam, Christianity, and ancient Indian beliefs, the issue of the eye of insight – often referred to as the inner vision or spiritual

perception, which is observed as one of the fundamental aspects in Sufism – features prominently in the literary contributions of Mikhail Naimy. He eloquently posits that,

> Feelings that do not trust the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, or hand are nonsense in the code of people. If you tell them that they have eyes that cannot be seen, and ears of a better substance than the flesh and blood of the body, and that when you are in quiet reverie, they can see what the outer eye cannot see, and hear what the outer ear cannot hear... they instantly call you a fool or a madman (Naimy, 1952).

Here, Naimy deliberates on the limitations of ordinary perception, urging his readers to embrace a deeper understanding of reality.

In parallel, Aida Imanguliyeva, a prominent Azerbaijani scholar and literary figure, offers a poignant example from her reflective work 'Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul',

> ... Ah, Argash, if all the secrets of the universe were revealed to you... If I could say that every person has a secret eye and a secret ear, what their eyes do not see, what their ears do not hear, if I could convey what they perceive through thought and silence. (İmanquliyeva, 2003)

This sentiment echoes the teachings of Sufism regarding the eye of insight, suggesting that enlightened awareness extends beyond the physical senses, allowing individuals to grasp deep truths about existence.

Additionally, the celebrated writer Kahlil Gibran articulated a similar mystical insight when he asserted,

> Truly, if you open your eyes and look, you will be able to see your own reflection among all the images. When you open your ears and listen, you will hear your own voice among all the voices (Gibran, 2000),

emphasizing the notion that self-awareness is intertwined with the ability to perceive the world through a spiritual lens.

Conclusion

As evidenced by these reflections, Sufism emerges as a significant philosophical and literary movement, providing a rich framework that is extensively articulated in the works of Arab immigrant writers in the United States. These Arab immigrant writers, who have garnered immense recognition in the Western literary landscape, have adeptly woven the themes of Sufi spiritual insight and inner perception into their narratives, expanding the understanding of the self and the universe. We ought to embrace the rich legacy of Sufism and recognize its pivotal role in bridging the diversity of oriental and occidental cultures. Together, let us explore and celebrate the wisdom that transcends time and geography. From amid today's worldly challenges, let us join this transformative journey toward self-discovery and God-realization.

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