



MYSTICISM IN THE POETRY OF IBN AL-FARID

Dr. Md. Mehedi Hasan

Assistant Professor,

Department of Arabic,

University of Gour Banga, Malda, West Bengal.

Abstract: Sufism or Tasawwuf is a mystical interpretation of Islam and it emphasized the allegorical nature of language and writing. It also produced poetry closely linked to religion. Many of the works of Sufi poets appear to be simple ghazal or khamriyyah. Under the guise of the love or wine poem they would contemplate the mortal flesh and attempt to achieve transcendence. Mystical Arabic poetry depict broad concept of love as Love is considered as a mean to understanding and gaining knowledge of God since ancient period.

Ibn al-Farid (1181 – 1234) is one of the major poets of Arabic language as well as the greatest and the finest poet of all who wrote mystic poetry in Arabic. He is a supreme master of symbolistic style of the Sufis. Due to the subject matter of his poems and the beauty of the verse, Ibn al-Farid later became referred to as ‘Sultan al-Ashiqin’ (the King of lovers). He has won lasting fame mainly for his two masterpieces ‘al-Khamriyah’ and ‘al-Taiyah al-Kubra’.

Index Terms - Sufism, mysticism, Ibn al-Farid, Arabic poetry, al-Khamriyah.

Mystic Arabic poetry arose along with the development of Sufi theory at the beginning of the ninth century A.D. and flourished during the next several centuries. Its origins were 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. They were inspired by the profane secular Arabic love poetry in its both erotic (*hissī*) and Platonic (*udhrī*) trends which emerged out of the pre-Islamic period and the early Islamic area. The most prominent medieval Sufi poets are Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya (d. 801), al-Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr al- Ḥallāj (858–922), Muḥyī d-Dīn ibn al-Arabī (1164–1240) and Umar ibn al-Fāriḍ (1181–1234).

Abu al-Qasim Sharaf al-Din 'Umar ibn 'Ali ibn al-Farid generally known as Ibn al-Fāriḍ was one of the greatest Egyptian mystical poets who was born and died in Cairo.

The name al-Fāriḍ (means notary) refers to the profession of his father, who belonged to Ḥamāⁱ city but migrated to Cairo, where ‘Omar was born in 1181 AD. In early youth he studied *Shāfi‘ī* law and *Ḥadīth*; then came his conversion to Ṣūfism, and for many years he led the life of a solitary devotee, first among the hills ‘al-Muḩaṭṭam’ⁱⁱ in south-eastern Cairo and afterwards in the Ḥijāz.

In 1231 A.D. he made the pilgrimage to Mecca, on which occasion he met the renowned Sufi Shihab al-Din Abu Hafs 'Umar al-Suhrawardi (1145 – 1234) of Baghdad.ⁱⁱⁱ While visiting the Hijaz he had a vision of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH, and is said to have written most of his poetry there.^{iv} On his return to Cairo, he was venerated as a saint; his tomb is still visited.

His poetry is entirely Sufic and he was esteemed as the greatest mystic poet of the Arabs. Due to the subject matter of his poems and the beauty of the verse, Ibn al-Farid later became referred to as ‘*Sultan al-Ashiqin*’ (the King of lovers).

His Diwan was first collected, edited and published by his grandson Ali. Although the amount of verse preserved in his Diwan is modest when compared to collections by his contemporaries, he has won lasting fame mainly for his two masterpieces:

1. **The *al-Khamriyah*** (*The Wine Ode*, translated in English with other poems, in R.A Nicholson's *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 1921 and in *The Mystical Poems of Ibn al-Fāriḍ*, translated by A.J. Arberry, 1956): a beautiful meditation on the 'wine' of divine bliss. This long *qaṣīdah* describes the effects of the wine of divine love 'with which we became drunk before the vine was created', and the drinking of which is no sin but an obligation. Ibn al-farid says in the opening verse of his *al-Khamriyah*:

*"In memory of the Beloved
We drank a wine;
Intoxicated we were
With this wine before
The vine was created."*

Here '*al-Habib*' (the Beloved) is the Prophet, or the Creator Himself, source of love. The wine is the knowledge, and love of the Divinity, and the intoxication is ecstasy.

Then he says:

*"The full moon its glass, the wine
a sun, circled by a crescent;
when it is diluted,
how many stars appear!"*

The description is a contrast with the material crystal cup and red wine usually handed round by a young attendant, and the wine being then diluted with water. The full moon represents the Prophet, the sun represents the divine wine. The crescent represents the learned. The dilution means the various religions. The stars represent the bubbles that rise in dilution and mean the teachers of the various religions.

He further says:

*I could never reach the tavern
Without its fragrance;
I could not have imagined it
Without its sparkle and radiance.
Age has purified it to its essence
Like a secret to be kept."*

In this celebrated *Qasida*, Ibn al-Farid praises a wine in existence before creation. Clearly, then, the first intoxication occurs in pre-eternity, where humanity bore witness before God. But Ibn al-Farid goes on to tell us that this blissful state is now lost, while the beloved is veiled by creation. None of the miraculous wine is left to drink; only its fragrance lingers. But this is enough for those who seek it; even its mention will intoxicate the spiritually sensitive while arousing others who have forgotten its very existence.

Although numerous commentaries have expounded on the poem's possible mystical meanings, several medieval commentators have focused specifically on Ibn al-Farid's use within the ode of terms relating to *dhikr*, and so they have offered intriguing interpretations. Since the primordial covenant bears witness to God's unity, these commentators have read the *al-Khamriyah* as an account of the spiritual effects resulting from the controlled repetition of the first portion of the Muslim profession of faith 'There is no god but Allah'.^{vi}

Hasan al-Burini praises the easy flow '*Insijam*' of the versification, and declares that Ibn al-Farid 'is accustomed to play with ideas in ever-changing forms, and to clothe them with splendid garments.'^{vii}

- The lengthy *Nazm al-suluk* (The Poem of the Way) which is also known as *al-Taiyah al-Kubra* or 'Greater Poem Rhyming in Ta'.^{viii} It comprises more than 760 verses. It is a profound exploration of spiritual experience along the Sufi Path which became the primary focus for the majority of his later admirers and perhaps the longest mystical poem composed in Arabic. R. A. Nicholson described it as 'not only a unique masterpiece of Arabic poetry but a document of surpassing interest to every student of mysticism'.

The first Hundred and sixty-three (163) verses of *al-Taiyah al-kubra* could stand alone as one of Ibn al-Farid's love poems. Using classical wine and love imagery, the poet recollects his prior intoxicating union with his beloved and his present sorry state in separation from her; though near unto death, he remains ever faithful to their covenant and his cherished memories of their previous encounter. Again, Ibn al-Farid adds a mystical dimension to his love poetry by making distinct references to the primordial covenant and the pilgrimage combined with his consistent use of technical language derived from Islamic mysticism, law, and theology.^{ix}

Arberry opines that 'The great theme of the poem is the mystic's quest for and realization of his identity with the Spirit of Muhammad, and thereby the absorption of his individual personality into the Unity of God'.^x

On account of this poem ibn al-Farid was accused of favouring the doctrine of '*hulul*' i.e., the incarnation of God in human beings.^{xi}

Both the poems *al-khamriyya* and *al-taiyah al-kubra* have become classics of Sufism and have occasioned many commentaries by such figures as Shaykh 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi and Hasan al-Burini^{xii} and the Persians Mawlanā Nūr al-Dīn 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (1414-1492)^{xiii} and Abd al-Razzaq al-Kashani (d. between 1329-35). Both the poems are still reverently memorized by Sufis and other devout Muslims today.

While Ibn al-Farid's views on *dhikr* and other Sufi topics were not new and were, in fact, rather traditional, his expression of them was both original and highly nuanced, lending itself to a wide range of interpretations. Many even went so far as to regard his verse as flowing from divine ecstasy, and this view is reflected in the numerous accounts of how Ibn al-Farid fell into a trance upon hearing a verse and in the many stories of how his poetry did the same to others.^{xiv}

Although Ibn al-Farid's poetic output is small, it is both important and original. Many of his shorter poems may have been composed to be sung at Sufi gatherings '*sama*'. Over the centuries Sufis have gathered together to perform their *dhikr* as part of a larger ceremony called *sama*, an 'audition' in which selections from the *Quran* and poetry provide material for group meditation and dance. Nicholson remarks that 'the outer and inner meanings are so interwoven that they may be read either as love poems or as mystical hymns.'^{xv}

Although Ibnul farid was an eminent Sufi but he was basically a poet who had studied his craft profoundly and had the genius to handle it with surprising easy. Rhetorical devices and fantastic canoeist are a general and obvious features of Ibnul Farid's style, a feature popularized by *Basshar bin Burd*, perfected by *Ibn al-Mutazz* and brought into prominence by *al-Mutanabbi* since whose time it had maintained itself not merely a local or temporary fashion but with all the force of a fixed and almost universally accepted tradition.

Many of Ibn al-Fārid's poems are on the lover's longing for reunion with his beloved. He expresses through this convention his yearning for a return to *Makka* and, at a deeper level, a desire to be assimilated into the spirit of Muhammad (PBUH), first projection of the Godhead.

Ibn al-Farid's skill in using the Arab poetic tradition for such religious ends is readily apparent in his shorter formal odes. The classical *Qasidah* normally begins in an elegiac mood, as the poet expresses feelings of grief and loss amid the ruined campsite abandoned by his former lover. Often the poet recalls the days of blissful union with her, but he leaves this past and the ruins to cross the blazing desert on his sturdy she-camel. The tone of the poem then turns heroic as the poet completes his quest and arrives at his tribe or patron, whom he praises.

Ibn al-Farid added further nuance to these classical themes through wordplay and other rhetorical devices that made reference to the *Quran* and well-known Islamic beliefs and practices. This should remind us that Ibn al-Farid was a consummate poet, and we must grasp some of the beauty of his poetry, its moods, meanings, and spiritual import, to appreciate Ibn al-Farid's honoured place among his contemporaries and among later generations, who spoke of other mystical poets as composing 'in the way of Ibn al-Farid'.

In conclusion, He is one of the major poets of Arabic language as well as the greatest and the finest poet of all who wrote mystic poetry in Arabic. He is a supreme master of symbolistic style of the *Sufis*. His poetry is considered by many to be the pinnacle of Arabic mystical verse.

References:

1. Arberry, A.J. "Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam", Dover Publications, 2001.
2. Nicholson R.A., *A Literary History of the Arabs*, Kitab Bhavan, 1994.
3. Homerin Th. Emil, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Farid, His Verse and His Shrine*, The American University in Cairo Press, 2001.
4. Mahmood Jamal, *Islamic Mystical Poetry: Sufi Verse from the early Mystics to Rumi*, Penguin Classics; 1st edition, 2009.
5. Arberry, A.J., *The Poem of the Way*, Emery Walker limited, London, 1952.
6. Nadeem Dr. S.H., *A Critical Appreciation of Arabic Mystical Poetry*, Adam Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 1st Edition, 2003.
7. Ibn Fārid, In Chisholm, Hugh (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 14 (11th ed.), Cambridge University Press.
8. Julie Scott Meisami & Paul Starkey, *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, Routledge, 1998.
9. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Other Press, 2008.
10. Boullata, Issa. *Verbal Arabesque and Mystical Union: A Study of Ibn al Farid's Al-Ta'iyya Al-Kubra*, Arab Studies Quarterly 3, 1981.

ⁱ . A city on the banks of the Orontes River in west-central Syria.

ⁱⁱ . The *Mokattam* is the name of a range of hills and a suburb in them, located in south-eastern Cairo, Egypt.

ⁱⁱⁱ . Nicholson R.A., *A Literary History of the Arabs*, p. 396.

^{iv} . *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, p. 324.

^v . Translated by Mahmood Jamal, *Islamic Mystical Poetry: Sufi Verse from the early Mystics to Rumi*.

^{vi} . *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Farid, His Verse and His Shrine*, p. 11.

^{vii} . Nicholson R.A., *A Literary History of the Arabs*, p. 396.

^{viii} . The poem was translated in English by A.J. Arberry as *The Poem of the Way* in 1952)

^{ix} . *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Farid, His Verse and His Shrine*, p. 11.

^x . Arberry, A.J., *The Poem of the Way*, p. 5.

^{xi} . Nicholson R.A., *A Literary History of the Arabs*, p. 396.

^{xii} . Badr al-Din al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Dimashqi al-Saffuri al-Burini (July 1556-11 June 1615), commonly known as al-Hasan al-Burini, was a Damascus-based Ottoman Arab historian and poet and Shafi'i jurist.

^{xiii} . He was a Persian poet who is known for his achievements as a prolific scholar and writer of mystical Sufi literature. He was primarily a prominent poet-theologian of the school of Ibn Arabi and a Khwājagānī Sūfī, recognized for his eloquence and for his analysis of the metaphysics of mercy. His most famous poetic works are Haft Awrang, Tuhfat al-Ahrar, Layla wa Majnun etc.

^{xiv} . *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Farid, His Verse and His Shrine*, p. 14.

^{xv} . *A Literary History of the Arabs*, p. 396.

