



METHODOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN SUFISM FROM THE EARLY MASTERS TO THE MODERN INNOVATORS: THE POETIC PHILOSOPHY OF ABU AL-HASAN AL-SHUSHTARI AS AN EXEMPLAR

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**METHODOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN SUFISM
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Mohammed Abdulkareem Yaseen

ABSTRACT:

The article examines the shifts that occur in method in Sufism from the early stages to the later innovative ones, taking as a sample the poetic philosophy of Abu al-Hasan al-Shushtari. The study traces historical developments, clarifies linguistic and terminological origins, and identifies the major figures and core themes of early and modern Sufism. With a descriptive-historical and analytical approach, it distinguishes classical Sufism based on strict adherence to Islamic orthodoxy and ethical discipline from later forms that incorporate symbolic language and controversial metaphors, giving rise to doctrinal debates and criticisms from orthodox scholars. In particular, the poetry of al-Shushtari is critically analyzed to expose how some of the poet's symbolic and metaphorical utterances, although artistically very powerful, have created serious theological controversy with regard to their considerable potential to deviate from established doctrinal and ethical confines. It emphasizes the need for a very fine balance between appreciating the literary contributions of Sufi poets without deviating from the shores of Islamic doctrinal teachings. Finally, it recommends that research should be carried out in due context, with full methodological rigor and clarity regarding

Islamic doctrinal principles, and with the backing of a comprehensive bibliography.

KEYWORDS: Sufism, Methodological Transformations, Abu al-Hasan al-Shushtari, Symbolic Language, Doctrinal Boundaries.

Introduction

Among all classical and contemporary scholars, Sufism is perhaps the most intensely debated intellectual and spiritual phenomenon in Islam, not limited to its linguistic and terminological definitions, but also its historical development through schools and methodologies. It is, therefore, necessary to revisit the roots linguistically and terminologically of Sufism, search historical trajectories and methodological changes, and identify its leading figures thus paving the way for a focused study of the poetic philosophy of Abu al-Hasan al-Shushtari as a practical model.

1. The Linguistic Definition of Sufism

Lexicographers have differed regarding the etymology of the term "Sufism" (tasawwuf). Some have linked it to "wool" (ṣūf), the garment worn by early ascetics; others have related it to the "People of the Bench" (Ahl al-Ṣuffā) who resided in the Prophet's Mosque during the early days of Islam. Ibn Faris, in his classical lexicon *Maqāyīs al-Lughā*, traces the root "ṣād-wāw-fā'" to notions of purity and clarity, while others see it as referring to the familiar textile¹.

جاء في معجم مقاييس اللغة لابن فارس قوله صوف - الصاد والواو والفاء
أصل واحد صحيح، وهو الصوف المعروف. والباب كله يرجع إليه. يقال

¹ Abū al-Ḥusayn Aḥmad Ibn Fāris, *Muʿjam Maqāyīs al-Lughā*, 2nd ed (Cairo, Egypt: Maktabat Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa-Awlāduh, 1972), 3/322.

كَبَشُ أَصُوفٍ وَصُوفٍ وَصَائِفٍ وَصَافٍ، كُلُّ هَذَا أَنْ يَكُونَ كَثِيرُ الصُّوفِ.
وَيَقُولُونَ: أَخَذَ بِصُوفَةِ قَفَاهُ، إِذَا أَخَذَ بِالشَّعَرِ السَّائِلِ فِي نَقْرَتِهِ. وَصُوفَةٌ: قَوْمٌ
كَانُوا فِي الْجَاهِلِيَّةِ، كَانُوا يَخْدُمُونَ الْكَعْبَةَ، وَيُجِيزُونَ الْحَاجَّ. وَحَكَى عَنْ أَبِي
عَبِيدَةَ أَنَّهُمْ أَفْنَاءُ الْقِبَائِلِ تَجْمَعُوا فَتَشَبَّكَوا كَمَا يَتَشَبَّكُ الصُّوفُ. قَالَ:
وَلَا يَرِيْمُونَ فِي التَّعْرِيفِ مَوْقِفَهُمْ.... حَتَّى يَقَالَ أَجِيرُوا آلَ صُوفَانَا
فَأَمَّا قَوْلُهُمْ: صَافٍ عَنِ الشَّرِّ، إِذَا عَدَلَ عَنْهُ.

Some researchers suggest that, at its core, the term originally referred to inner purity before being associated with external appearances.

2. The Terminological and Philosophical Definition of Sufism:

Definitions of Sufism have varied across different schools and historical periods. Dhu'l-Nūn al-Miṣrī declares:

“The Sufi is one whose words reveal profound truths when he speaks, and when he remains silent, his very limbs bear witness to his severance from worldly attachments”.

In other words, his actions express his detachment from all things temporal.

Indeed, every utterance of the Sufi is founded upon truth, and every deed is grounded in spiritual abstraction. If he speaks, his speech embodies reality; if he remains silent, his entire being expresses renunciation and spiritual poverty. Abu Sarrāj, meanwhile, described Sufism as “entering into every noble character and departing from every base trait,” emphasizing a commitment to moral excellence and detachment from worldly concerns. Many scholars have asserted that Sufism is not merely composed of sayings or poetry, but constitutes an ethical and intellectual

methodology that is reflected in the conduct and spiritual ascent of its adherents.

يقول ذو النون المصري: الصوفي من إذا نطق أبان نطقه عن الحقائق وإن سكت نطقته عنه الجوارح بقطع العلائق أي عبرت جوارحه عن قطعه لكل ما هو دنيوي: إن كل ما يقوله الصوفي قائم على الحقيقة، وكل ما يفعله قائم على التجريد، إذا قال فقله حقيقة، وإذا سكت فأعماله جميعاً فقر 2.

3. The Emergence and Historical Development of Sufism:

Islamic Sufism has passed through several historical stages, which may be summarized as follows:

The Stage of Emergence (2nd century AH): Marked by a spirit of asceticism and sincerity, Sufism during this period was characterized by practical devotion rather than theoretical discourse³.

The Period of Philosophical Crystallization (3rd and 4th centuries AH): The latest intellectual explosion has been at least heralded by the likes of al-Hallāj and Ibn ‘Arabī, who introduced philosophical and symbolic dimensions into Sufism.⁴

The period is coincided with the literary and artistic flourishing: The Sufi poetry takes a most prominent position in the expression of spiritual

² Alī ibn ‘Uthmān al-Hujwīr, *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, First Edition, vol. 1 (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, 2007), 56.

³ Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad Al-Sulamī, *abaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya wa Yalīhi Dhikr al-Niswah al-Muta‘abbidāt al-Ṣūfiyyāt*, 2nd edition (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2003), 25.

⁴ Gracia López-Angueta, “Ibn ‘Arabī’s Metaphysics in the Context of Andalusian Mysticism: Some Akbarian Concepts in the Light of Ibn Masarra and Ibn Barrajān,” *Religions* 12, no. 1 (January 8, 2021): 7, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12010040>.

experiences with representatives such as Ibn al-Fāriḍ, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī, and Abu al-Hasan al-Shushtari.⁵

Whereas in 70-80 the foundation of a new Sufi order was established every month in the Muslim world, diversity of Sufi orders and expansion growth took place from the 7th century AH onward. Sufism diffused in the cultural and social life of the Islamic world.⁶

4. Major Trends and Schools of Sufism:

Three main trends in Sufism can be mentioned:

The Doctrinal/Sunni Trend: Al-Junayd al-Baghdadi and al-Ghazali are typically regarded as the representatives of this sect due to its stringent follow-up principled Shar'i norms-to-the-letter and joining Sufism with orthodox belief in Islam.

It was a bit difficult to work at the beginning because Sufism itself is different for different people. In the same way, many people do things in common and at the same time are going to end up doing things in ways that are very much different from the extremes of one another. To date, there have become excellent Sufi trends or schools. Among them are the doctrinal or Sunni trends and mystical trends usually direct⁷

⁵ Karomat Kilicheva and Gavkhar Klicheva, "Sufi and Philosophical Heritage of Jalaluddin Rumi," *International Journal of Humanities, Literature & Arts* 5, no. 1 (December 18, 2021): 2, <https://doi.org/10.21744/ijhla.v5n1.1799>.

⁶ "Introduction: Medieval Sufi-Futuwwat/Jawanmardi," in *Jawanmardi*, by Lloyd Ridgeon (Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 15, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748645992-002>.

⁷ Cucu Setiawan, Maulani Maulani, and Busro Busro, "Sufism as The Core of Islam: A Review of Imam Junayd Al-Baghdadi's Concept of Tasawwuf," *Teosofia: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism* 9, no. 2 (October 31, 2020): 17, <https://doi.org/10.21580/tos.v9i2.6170>.

Socio-religious orders flourished as with orders like Shadhiliyya, Qadiriyya, and Rifaiyya, which rapidly developed in popularity by emphasizing communal rituals and mass appeal⁸.

The Literary/Poetic Trend: Characterized through the production of Sufi literature and poetry, among which is Ibn al-Fāriḍ and Abu al-Hasan al-Shushtari.⁹

5. The Status of Sufi Poetry and the Experience of al-Shushtari:

Poetry has been the most important medium for the Sufi experience. Many Sufis have used images and symbols to express their spiritual meanings and philosophical ideas. However, the poetry of Sufi tradition is not monolithic in its doctrinal allegiance; nor is it restricted to the borders of Islamic law. It covers an entire range of approaches. Throughout the history of Islamic mysticism, there have been poets whose works have excited heated debates between scholars and critics, among whom Abu al-Hasan al-Shushtari ranks among the most famous.

The poetic heritage of al-Shushtari specifically serves as one of the most polemical examples in the Sufi tradition. Some characteristics of his poetry show a rather bold treatment of divine and spiritual themes, such that certain scholars have pushed them to violate the established doctrinal and literary limits of the Islamic heritage. His verses have been assailed by theologians and jurists for allegedly containing allusions or statements

⁸ "Introduction," 17.

⁹ Yousef Casewit, "Shushtari's Treatise On the Limits of Theology and Sufism: Discursive Knowledge (Ilm), Direct Recognition (Marifa), and Mystical Realization (Tahqiq) in al-Risala al-Qusariyya," *Religions* 11 (2020): 14.

violating the sanctity of the Divine¹⁰. In this context, the present study approaches al-Shushtari not to glorify or defend his poetic choices, but to subject them to critical analysis as a means of understanding the methodological transformations that Sufi poetry has undergone, and to highlight the problematic dimensions that may arise when mystical experience loses its moorings in Shar‘ī and literary discipline.

The evaluation of al-Shushtari's poetry, therefore, would be an objective academic critique intended to expose intellectual and doctrinal pitfalls that might be involved with crossing over his particular form of Islamic worship and ethics by certain Sufis. It needs to be stressed that the study and discussion of al-Shushtari's texts neither endorse nor campaign for his position. It only intends to show how the Sufi experience, when taken out of condition, can become a contentious issue that requires rigorous evaluation both at the academic and religious levels.

Ultimately, the final judgment on such examples remains the prerogative of qualified scholars, and it is incumbent upon researchers in the field of Sufi studies to maintain objectivity and to exercise caution against uncritical admiration for literary aesthetics or ambiguous symbolism, in the absence of clear scholarly and Shar‘ī standards.

6. Core Themes of Sufism: A Structured Overview:

The original classical Sufi literature created by early mystics and poets encompasses a number of profound themes in spirituality and ethical issues. Some of the most important themes are:

¹⁰ Lourdes Alvarez, "The Mystical Language of Daily Life: Vernacular Sufi Poetry and the Songs of Abū Al-Hasan Al-Shushtarī," *Exemplaria* 17, no. 1 (January 2005): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1179/exm.2005.17.1.1>.

-Tension between the Material and the Spiritual: Between the worldly demands on one hand and the aspiring self on the other.

-Vigour and Mortality of Minds: The endurance of the intellect and wisdom, even when the humans bearing them die.

Meditation on death and the next world: The last moments of life, burial, and the things that are not known concerning the life beyond .

Inner optimism and an introspective view: The focus is for internal reality and not external appearance .

Laudation of companionship with the wise and virtuous: Friendship is priceless when established among those with wisdom and virtue, whereas companionship with those of the contrary character corrupts the soul.

Knowing one's self above lineage and material status: Being concerned, therefore, with prayer and humility, beyond pride in lineage or worldly achievements.

Witnessing divine unity in creation: Meditative attention to the signs of blessedness and transcendence, which brings direct observation of God's oneness and majesty.

Warnings against spiritual complacency: Addressing evil-doers to make a reminder to others of the inner life and neither that this life is certain of death.

Acceptance and contentment: Submission to the divine decree and finding peace in God's will, come what may in the worlds.

Awareness that time is fleeting: Thoughts on the swiftness of life, human neglect, and the numbing distractions that hinder spiritual growth.

Silence: Speaking little because wisdom is knowing that often it leads to faults in actions or spiritual danger.

Repentance, piety, and humility: Persevering in turning toward God at every point, turning away from greed and worldly ends, cultivating charity and good company.

Etiquette with God and divine love: The development of fine manners in the presence of God and experience of deep attachment to the Divine.¹¹

These themes collectively represent the ethical and metaphysical foundation of Sufi practice and thought, as articulated by the tradition's leading figures throughout history.

7. The Poetic Philosophy of Abu al-Hasan al-Shushtari: Analysis and Critical Perspective:

7.1. The Main Motifs in al-Shushtari's Poetry:

Upon examining the poetic legacy of Abu al-Hasan al-Shushtari, several core motifs emerge:

Divine Love and Annihilation:

Al-Shushtari's poetry is deeply rooted in the motif of divine love (maḥabba ilāhiyya), frequently expressed to the extent of fana' (annihilation of the self in the Divine). The yearning for closeness to God, sometimes described in terms of "absence from the world" and the transition to spiritual realms, is a defining feature of his verse.

حيث يقول في ذلك:

سُلُوِّي مَكْرُوهُ وَحُبُّكَ وَاجِبٌ وَشَوْقِي مُقِيمٌ وَالتَّوَّاصِلُ غَائِبٌ
وَفِي لَوْحِ قَلْبِي مِنْ وَدَادِكَ أَسْطَرٌ وَدَمْعِي مِدَادٌ مِثْلُ مَا الْحَسَنُ كَاتِبٌ

¹¹ Mohammed Ghaly, *End-of-Life Care, Dying and Death in the Islamic Moral Tradition: أخلاق العناية في الإسلام: الرعاية الصحية عند نهاية العمر والاحتضار والموت* (BRILL, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1163/97890004459410>.

وقارِء فكري للمحاسن تالياً على درّس آيات الجمال يواظبُ
 أنزّه طرفي في سماء جمالكم لثاقب ذهني نجمها هو ثاقبُ
 يقولون لي تب عن هوى من تحبّه فقلت عن السلوان إنّي تائبُ
 عذاب الهوى عذب على كل عاشق وإن كان عند الغير صعبٌ وواصبُ¹²

Symbolic Language – Wine, Cup, and Layla:

His work makes extensive use of Sufi symbols such as the divine wine, the cup of union, and the beloved Layla—all metaphors for spiritual ecstasy, mystical knowledge, and the soul's longing for the Absolute. Through these images, al-Shushtari seeks to convey states of spiritual experience that, according to Sufi tradition, can only be truly understood by those who have attained similar mystical realizations.

ويقول أيضا فيما يسميه ليلي، (تعالى الله عما يصفون علوا كبيرا):
 غير ليلي لم يُر في الحيّ حي سل متى ما ارتبت عنها كل شي
 كل شي سرّها فيه سرّي فلذا يثنى عليها كل شي
 قال من أشهد معنى حُسنها إنه منتشر والكل طي
 هي كالشمس تلالا نورها فمتى ما إن ترمة عاد في
 هي كالمرآة تبدي صورا قابلتها وبها ما حل شي¹³
 ويقول في الخمر أيضا:

¹² Muḥammad al-ʿAdlūnī, *Dīwān Abī al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī*, First edition (Casablanca: Dār al-Thaqāfa lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzīʿ, 2008), 30.

¹³ al-ʿAdlūnī, 83.

طَابَ شَرْبُ الْمَدَامِ فِي الْخَلَوَاتِ	أَسْقِنِي يَانْدِيمَ بِالْأَنْيَاتِ
خَمْرَةً تَرَكُهَا عَلَيْنَا حَرَامٌ	لَيْسَ فِيهَا إِثْمٌ وَلَا شُبُهَاتُ
عُتِّقَتْ فِي الدُّنَانِ مِنْ قَبْلِ آدَمَ	أَصْلُهَا طَيْبٌ مِنَ الطَّيْبَاتِ
أَفْتَنِي أَهْلُهَا الْفَقِيهُ وَقَلَّ لِي	هَلْ يَجُوزُ شَرْبُهَا عَلَى عَرَافَاتِ
أَوْ يَجُوزُ الطَّوْافُ وَالسَّعْيُ بِهَا	وَيَلْبَى وَيُرْمَى بِالْخُمَرَاتِ
أَوْ يَجُوزُ الْقِرَاءُ وَالذِّكْرُ بِهَا	أَوْ يَجُوزُ التَّسْبِيحُ فِي الصَّلَوَاتِ
فَأَجَابَ الْفَقِيهُ إِنْ كَانَ خَمْرَ	عَنْبٍ فِيهِ شَيْءٌ مِنَ الْمُسْكِرَاتِ
شُرِبَ عِنْدَنَا حَرَامٌ يَقِينًا	زَائِدٌ فِيهِ شَيْءٌ مِنَ الشُّبُهَاتِ
أَهْ يَا ذَا الْفَقِيهِ لَوْ ذُقْتَ مِنْهَا	وَسَمِعْتَ الْأَلْحَانَ فِي الْخَلَوَاتِ
لَتَرَكْتَ الدُّنْيَا وَمَا أَنْتَ فِيهِ	وَتَعَشَّ هَائِمًا لِيَوْمِ الْمَمَاتِ ¹⁴

Evocation of Ruins and the Lost Beloved:

Echoing the conventions of both pre-Islamic and classical Arabic poetry, al-Shushtari often invokes images of ruins, lost love, and the desert breeze, reinterpreting them as symbols for the soul's longing and the transience of worldly attachments.

7.2. Critical Appraisal: Literary Innovation and Doctrinal Boundaries:

¹⁴ al-'Adlūnī, 32.

While there are certainly Sufi fingerprints over the poetry of al-Shushtari, what such poets elevate to a much higher level, such than those really popularized by poets like Ibn al-Farid, would contrast with his style, though simplistically by a parameter of accessibility. Thus, while Ibn al-Farid employs intricate rhetorical structures and deep symbolism, al-Shushtari employed vernacular language and common idioms. Although this factor made his poetry widely popular with Andalusian audiences, it has, however, subject him to severe criticism by traditional grammarians and literary purists, A very serious doctrinal caveat stands here .

Some of al-Shushtari's metaphors and expressions, particularly those concerning the Divine Essence, mystical union (ittihad and the "divine wine"), are wretchedly out of line with orthodox Islamic theology. Language of union, indwelling (hulul), or intimate love with the Divine has attracted much controversy throughout history, and even many illustrious scholars brand such expressions as violations of tawhid (pure monotheism) and transgressions of Shar'ī and ethical boundaries .

This study engages the poetry of al-Shushtari for strictly scholarly analysis and critique. While inclusion of these themes in his work and this analysis should not be construed as endorsing or accepting them, it is the researcher's duty to note that such language should be regarded according to well-known principles of Islamic creed and that cautions should be made against its effects in transgressing core tenets of faith.

7.3. Comparative Perspective: Al-Shushtari and Ibn al-Farid:

Although the poetry of al-Shushtari bears a clear mark to writings left by Ibn al-Farid and other Sufi ancestors, he cannot be counted a leading innovator within that school. Often scorned for linguistic simplicity and ready acquiescence to everyday vernacular usage, this verse has thus opened it to the many but, unfortunately, accused such as it does of

softening the poetic rigor of classical Arabic standards. Further, the bulk of his mystical symbolisms and philosophism falls within familiar Sufi convention rather than pressing forward in significant advances in theory or letters.

ومن الاشعار الدالة على تقليده لمن سبقه في النهج الشعري وتحديد ابن الفارض قول بن الفارض في ليلي اذ يقول:

هل نارُ ليلي بدتْ ليلاً بذي سَلَمٍ	أَمْ بَارِقٌ لاح في الزوراء فالعَلَمِ
أَرْواحَ نَعْمَانٍ هَلَا نَسْمَةُ سَحَرًا	وماءَ وَجَرَةٍ هَلَا نَهْلَةٌ بَقَمٍ
يا سائقَ الظعنِ يطوي البِيدَ مُعْتَسِفًا	طَيَّ السَّجَلَ بذاتِ الشَّيخِ من إَضَمٍ
عُجْ بِالْحِمَى يا رَعَاكَ اللهُ مُعْتَمِدًا	خَمِيلَةَ الضَّالِّ ذاتِ الرِّندِ والخُرْمِ
وَقِفْ بسلعٍ وسل بالجزع هل مُطِرَتْ	بالرَّقْمَتَيْنِ أُثَيَّلَاتٍ بِمُنْسَجِمٍ ¹⁵

وهنا يتجلى امرين فأما الأول فهو سيره على نهج من سبقه في سبك تلك الاشعار والتي تحدثت عنها اهل العلم وحذروا منها والامر الثاني الضعف اللغوي وقلة المعاني وخمول القريحة لديه وتفوق بن الفارض عليه في قوة السبك وجودة المعاني وانفتاح القريحة الشعرية لكنهما متفقان في النهج المخالف والصريح للكتاب والسنة النبوية الشريفة تعالى الله عما يصفون علوا كبيرا.

¹⁵ Abd al-Ghanī An-Nābulusī, *Kashf Al-Sirr al-Ghāmiḍ Fī Sharḥ Dīwān Ibn al-Fāriḍ*, First edition, vol. 3 (Damascus: Dar Ninawā's technical production unit, 2017), 1335.

Amazingly, although there were criticisms of the poet, the fact that he was standing between the twofold popular reception of his poetry in Andalusia and his skill of expressing Sufi ideas in an intelligible way ensures that such concern did not cloud his continued impact within certain strands of the Sufi tradition.

Engaging with al-Shushtari's poetry or similar pieces will require full appreciation, as noted earlier, of both their literary value and doctrinal limitations. The final judgment regarding these, especially property matters of creed, will be reserved to qualified Islamic jurists. In other words, he has left academic critics out of the purview of being able to judge his poetry from the point of view of Islam. It is to be noted that critics and all enthusiasts alike should endeavor to remain objective in their minds and exercise better judgment against unnecessarily lauding poetic beauty or unclear metaphors, especially where these could be inconsistent with Muslims' core beliefs.

8. Key Differences between Ancient and Modern Sufism: Intellectual, Behavioral, and Stylistic Dimensions:

8.1. Intellectual Differences

Probably, between the classical and modern forms of Sufism, the most elementary distinction has to do with the association of each with Islamic doctrine and law .

If anyone were to have asked a Sufi or follower of Sufism in the early days, it is evident from all writings of great Sufis perusing, for example, a noisy place like al-Junayd al-Baghdadi or Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, that the ancient Sufism professed strict conformity to the tenets of Islamic sharī'a for mystical worship in the Qur'an and Sunnah, plus the ethical injunctions of early Islam. Balancing this declaration is the assertion that Sufism, like

theism, concerns selfpurification, moral discipline, and spiritual ascent, always within the orthodoxy.

ومن الأدلة على ذلك ما جاء في كتاب صفوة الصفوة لآين الجوزي قوله عن حامد بن إبراهيم قال: قال الجنيد بن محمد: الطريق إلى الله مسدود على خلق الله عز وجل إلا على المقتفين آثار رسول الله ﷺ والتابعين لسنته 16؛ كما قال الله عز وجل: ﴿لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ﴾ [الاحزاب: ٢١].

In contrast and light of this, modern Sufism-the way modernism is manifested in Sufism from the post-classical-notably seem to welcome more innovation and speculation, even when it sought to incorporate some non-Indian and perhaps non-Islamic elements. Certain poets and mystics, such as Abu al-Hasan al-Shushtari have also tried innovation in themes that were at times on the boundary of accepted doctrine. Some modern Sufis further rely on a Christian monastic imagery, that of wine and cup, and language that alludes to mystical union or incarnation-all subjects that drew sharp criticism from the religious scholars for transgressing the basic tenets of tawhīd (Islamic monotheism).

Sufism was generally characterized by post-classical modernism. Sufism was recently posted invention or innovation to come up with speculative ideas, and, for that matter, foreign or even non-Islamic philosophical elements are most restricted. Among other poets and mystics known for their works is Abu al-Hasan al-Shushtari; sometimes these two have boundaries in terms of accepted doctrines by experimentation with

¹⁶ Jamal al-Din Ibn al-Jawzi, *Ṣifat Al-Ṣafwa*, 1st edition (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, 2012), 466.

symbols and themes. Some contemporary Sufis have also used Christian monastic imagery, mentioned the cup and wine, and language alluding to mystical union or incarnation-topics which drew harsh criticism from theologians for violating the core principles of tawhīd (Islamic monotheism).

Usually, Sufism is characterized by prismatic ideas, which modern Sufism has recently begun from post-classical times forward. The post-classical period of Sufism appears to be even more innovative and speculative and seeks to borrow some foreign or even non-Islamic elements. There are certain poets and mystics like Abu al-Hasan al-Shushtari who have experimented with symbols and themes sometimes on the border of accepted doctrine. Here, some modern mystics resorted to the Christian monastic imagery, the references to the cup and wine, and the language associating to mystical union or incarnation-all subjects that drew sharp criticism from the theological scholars for transgressing the basic tenets of tawhīd (Islamic monotheism).

ومن ذلك قول أبو الحسن الششتري في قصيدة طويلة عن الدير والقسيس والخمر قوله:

تَأْدُبُ بِبَابِ الدَّيْرِ وَاخْلَعْ بِهِ النِّعْلَا	وَسَلِّمْ عَلَى الرُّهْبَانِ وَاحْطُطْ بِهِمْ رَحْلَا
وَعَظَّمْ بِهِ الْقَسِيسَ إِنْ شِئْتَ خُطْوَةً	وَكَبِّرْ بِهِ الشَّمَّاسَ إِنْ شِئْتَ أَنْ تَعْلَا
وَدُونَكَ أَصْوَاتُ الشَّمَامِيسِ فَاسْتَمِعْ	لِلْأَحَانِهِمْ وَاحْذَرِكْ أَنْ يَسْلُبُوا الْعَقْلَا
بَدَتْ فِيهِ أَقْمَارُ شُمُوسٍ طَوَالِعُ	يَطُوفُونَ بِالصُّلْبَانِ فَاحْذَرِكْ أَنْ تُبْلَى
فَايَّاكَ أَنْ تَسْمَعَ لَهُنَّ بِحِكْمَةٍ	وَإِيَّاكَ أَنْ تَجْمَعَ لَهُنَّ بِكَ الشَّمْلَا
فَإِنْ كَانَ هَذَا الشَّرْطُ وَفِيَتْ حَقُّهُ	بِصَدْقٍ وَلَمْ تُنْقِضْ عُهُودًا وَلَا قَوْلَا

دَعُوكَ بِقِسِّيْسٍ وَسَمُّوكَ رَاهِبًا	وأبدوا لك الأسرارَ واستحسنوا الفعلا
وأعطوك مفتاح الكنيسة والتي	بها صورت عيسى رهايينهم شكلا
نعم كل ما قد قلت لي قد سمعته	ولا أبتغي في ذاك ودًا ولا ميلا
ولمّا أتيت الدير أمسيْتُ سيِّدا	وأصبحتُ من زهوى أجر به الذيلا
سألت عن الخمار أين محلّه	وهل لي سبيل للوصُول به أم لا
فَقَالَ لي القسِّيْسُ ماذا تُريدُه	فَقُلْتُ أريدُ الخمر من عنده أملا 17

8.2. Behavioral and Social Differences:

While Classical Sufis had an attitude of humility, tolerance, and coexistence with society, they didn't confront, openly, the scholars and authorities, and taught in a manner that promoted social harmony and ethical betterment .

Modern Sufis, and those influenced especially by ecstatic or perhaps antinomian tendencies, on the contrary, tended to adopt radical behavior and often confront the religious authorities and social norms. The poetry and practice of Shushtari and others in this respect occasionally courted controversy for such audacious speech about the Divine, encourage behavior thought by some to be excessive, or convey mystical ideas that run counter to those subscribed to by most of the Islamic mainstream¹⁸.

8.3. Stylistic Differences: Poetry vs. Prose:

¹⁷ al-'Adlūnī, *Dīwān Abī al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī*, 59.

¹⁸ Ayman Shihadeh, *Sufism and Theology* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 14.

The ancient Sufi expression, in the literary sense, was concerned with clarity and directness of language, mostly in prose treatises (for instance, Qushayri's *Risala*, al-Ghazali's *Iḥyā'*, and early ascetic writings) that lay bare Sufi concepts and ground them in scriptural sources .

Modern Sufism, on the other hand, progressively began to find favor in poetic forms, symbolic language, and ambiguity, and in playing around with metaphor and imagery. Shushtari's poetry, for one, often works with vernacular Arabic, showing popular idioms and musicality so that his verse would be accessible yet controversial among classical grammarians and jurists.¹⁹

8.4. Application and Examples: The Case of al-Shushtari”

A striking example of these differences appears in the poetry of Abu al-Hasan al-Shushtari, whose verses often combine Sufi symbolism with references to wine, the cup, the monastery, and Christian figures—metaphors that, while intended as spiritual allegories, risked violating both linguistic decorum and doctrinal boundaries. For example, in one of his well-known poems, Shushtari invokes the image of the priest, the monastery, and the cup of wine, weaving together Islamic and Christian imagery in a manner that blurs conventional distinctions:

وَأَصْبَحْتُ مِنْ زَهْوَى أَجْرٍ بِهِ الذِّيلَا	وَلَمَّا أَتَيْتُ الدَّيْرَ أَمْسَيْتُ سَيِّدَا
وَهَلْ لِي سَبِيلٌ لِلْوُضُوءِ بِهِ أَمْ لَا	سَأَلْتُ عَنْ الْخَمَارِ أَيْنَ مَحَلُّهُ

¹⁹ Arin Salamah-Qudsi, “A New Study Model for Arabic Sufi Prose,” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 23, no. 1–2 (May 3, 2020): 85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1475262x.2021.1878647>.

فَقَالَ لِي الْقَسِيْسُ مَاذَا تُرِيْدُهُ فَقُلْتُ أُرِيْدُ الْخَمْرَ مِنْ عِنْدِهِ أَمَلًا 20

What happened? Tell the priest who is inside the monastery... more joyful burning, or a cup of wine?

We slept for him, let him have a fire that blazed ... until dawn...

Such language led to accusations of doctrinal irregularity and poetic excess, with critics charging that the mystical wine and the allusions to union with the Divine veered dangerously close to the prohibited territory of hulul (incarnation) and ittihad (unionism).

8.5. Doctrinal and Ethical Evaluation:

Indeed, this reasonable form of Sufism, having its ancestry in the ancient Islamic sources, regards sharī'ah as above all. Innovation essentially mustn't go against the mainstream principles of faith. As was the teaching of al-Ghazali and other early authorities, spiritual enlightenment is achieved by adherence to the Qur'an and Sunnah, purification of the heart, and the formation of character rather than through euphemistic symbols or practices that are detrimentally ambiguous to doctrinal clarity.

There is a strong tendency among the more extravagant poetic manifestations of modern Sufism to stretch the limits of traditional Sufi practices, giving preference over metaphor or personal experience to discipline. The responsible scholar and critic must define what comprises sincere Sufi creativity and what constitutes viable expressions but at the

²⁰ al-'Adlūnī, *Dīwān Abī al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī*, 59.

same time does not undermine the integrity of Islamic monotheism and ethical teachings.²¹

9. Symbolism, Spirituality, and Controversy in Sufi Poetry: From Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya to al-Shushtari:

9.1. Early Sunni Sufism: The Example of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya:

A salient feature of early Sunni Sufism is its strict adherence to Qur'anic values and the Prophetic tradition, both in doctrine and poetic expression. This is vividly illustrated in the poetry of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya, whose verses articulate pure love for God, devoid of esoteric or ambiguous symbolism:

ومما جاء عنها في شعرها في الحب الإلهي مما يتفق مع الكتاب والسنة النبوية
المطهرة قولها:

عرفت الهوى مذ عرفت هواك	وأغلقت قلبي عن من عاداك
وقمت أناجيك يا من ترى	خفايا القلوب ولسنا نراك
أحبك حين حب الهوى	وحباً لأنك أهل لذاك
فأما الذي هو حب الهوى	فشغلي بذكرك عمن سواك
وأما الذي أنت أهل له	فكشفك لي الحجب حتى أراك
فلا الحمد في ولا ذاك لي	ولكن لك الحمد في ذا وذاك ²²

²¹ William Rory Dickson, "Sufism and Shari'a: Contextualizing Contemporary Sufi Expressions," *Religions* 13, no. 5 (May 17, 2022): 449, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050449>.

²² Abdel Rahman Badawi, *Shahid al-'Ishq al-Ilahi: Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya*, 1st ed. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahda al-Misriyya, n.d.), 64.

Rabi'a's poetry is distinguished by spiritual sincerity, doctrinal clarity, and the avoidance of contentious metaphors. Her expression of love for God remains firmly rooted within the parameters of orthodoxy, free from the symbolic language that would later become a hallmark of Sufi poetry.

9.2. The Emergence of Symbolism: Ibn al-Farid and al-Shushtari:

While the later Sufi poets Ibn al-Farid and Abu al-Hasan-al-Shushtari had much to say for them in relation to wine, the cup, the beloved Layla, the priest, and the monastery as symbols of mystical experience. Although intended as metaphors for spiritual states, debate has sparked around the images to which they refer. Their works have often been criticized by the orthodox for their alleged violation of the boundaries existing between permissible poetic allegory and doctrinal transgression.

For instance, Ibn al-Farid writes:

شَرِبْنَا عَلَى ذِكْرِ الْحَبِيبِ مُدَامَةً	سَكِرْنَا بِهَا مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ يُخْلَقَ الْكَرَمُ
لَهَا الْبَدْرُ كَأْسٌ وَهِيَ شَمْسٌ يُدِيرُهَا	هَلَالٌ وَكَمْ يَبْدُو إِذَا مُزِجَتْ نَجْمٌ
وَلَوْ لَا شَذَاهَا مَا اهْتَدَيْتُ لِحَانِهَا	وَلَوْ لَا سَنَاها مَا تَصَوَّرَهَا الْوَهْمُ
وَلَوْ نَظَرَ النَّدْمَانُ خَتَمَ إِنَائِهَا	لَأَسْكَرَهُمْ مِنْ دُونِهَا ذَلِكَ الْخَتَمُ ²³

Such verses employ the motif of “spiritual wine” as a symbol of mystical knowledge and ecstasy. However, many classical scholars regarded this language as dangerously close to the prohibited concepts of hulul (incarnation) and ittihad (union), fearing that it might mislead the unlearned or transgress the sanctity of tawhid (monotheism).

²³ An-Nābulusī, *Kashf Al-Sirr al-Ghāmiḍ Fī Sharḥ Dīwān Ibn al-Fāriḍ*, 3:82.

9.3. Critical Responses and Doctrinal Boundaries:

Defenders of symbolic Sufism have sometimes argued that the Arabic language cannot fully convey the subtlety of their mystical experiences, justifying their use of veiled metaphors. Orthodox scholars, however, counter that Arabic has preserved the entire corpus of Islamic theology and law with precision, and that claims of its inadequacy are unfounded.

The emergence of these new poetic forms led to debates, and at times open conflict, between proponents of symbolic Sufism and mainstream scholars. The resulting polarization saw accusations of heresy (takfir) and defense letters in support of Sufi poets, underscoring the high stakes of language, interpretation, and orthodoxy within Islamic spiritual culture²⁴.

9.4. Individual Experience and Diversity within Sufism:

It denotes that the experience in Sufism is not homogenized; and that which moves the mystic voice is the personal experience that incorporates many approaches. For instance, Ibn al-Farid's "wine" is hardly ever the "wine" of al-Shushtari, and no one ever thinks about the imagery of Ibn Saba'in or al-Hallaj. However, because of this greater symbolic language the later Sufis contributed to the amount of esoteric interpretations, which became so far removed from the clear and accessible style of the early tradition.

9.5. Balanced Academic Judgment:

A nuanced approach is required to assess the legacy of Sufi poetry. On the one hand, the artistic and spiritual creativity of Sufi poets deserves recognition; on the other, scholars must remain vigilant against expressions that obscure or undermine foundational Islamic beliefs.

²⁴ Dickson, "Sufism and Shari'a."

Thus, the mature researcher neither uncritically celebrates literary aesthetics nor hastily condemns symbolic innovation, but rather engages with Sufi poetry as a complex, historically situated phenomenon—always measured against the enduring standards of Islamic doctrine and scholarly integrity.

10. Critical Judgment: Between Literary Innovation and Doctrinal Boundaries in Sufi Poetry:

A persistent and pivotal question in the study of Sufi poetry is this: Should the assessment of Sufi literature prioritize its literary and aesthetic merits, or must it always be measured first against the standards of Islamic doctrine? The evolution of Sufism—from the clear spiritual sincerity of the early masters to the layered symbolism and bold metaphors of later poets—has brought both remarkable artistic enrichment and significant controversy.

In a literary sense, for the given Sufi poets, symbolic and imaginative language, as in the case of al-shushtari, markedly expanded upon the expressive capacity of Arabic literature. Images and metaphors the likes of wine, the cup, the beloved, and the monastery give added dimensions of meaning, aiding the profound exploration of mystical experience, together with inspiring several generations of poets to experiment form and content alike. Such creations opened yet other tools of fresh creativities within the newly defined conventional boundaries of classical poetry.

In fact, these very innovations attracted much criticism. Many scholars of Sunni orthodoxy cited that the proliferation of ambiguous symbols and references, especially concerning the Divine Essence or mystical union or ecstasy language, posed a risk of blurring the line between allegory and doctrine. They were likely to confuse readers and mislead them even on the nature of God, if not invite theological error. This made the majority of

Muslims view Sufism alone with suspicion as opposed to the entire spiritual essence that it encapsulates, going against the practices and deviations of a minority.

So, then, balanced and critical should be the mature scholar. Sufi poetry has to be appreciated for its unadulterated contributions for literature and spirituality but never in neglect of doctrinal clarity or ethical responsibility. The finest examples in Sufism-from the pen of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya and early Sufi poets-demonstrate that within the larger space provided by Qur'anic guidance and prophetic teaching, profound spiritual expression and literary beauty can reside together.

Any critical evaluation of Sufi poetry will involve creating an artistic image while at the same time holding true to those principles in their entirety that Islam itself stands for. The true spirit of art lives only in intellectual integrity and moral soundness. Under such dual standards can this vast treasure of Sufi heritage be appreciated by scholars and readers alike without losing sight of the principles that have shaped Islamic civilization in all its history.

Conclusion:

This study elaborates that Sufism in its first manifestations embraced all aspects of a spiritual ethical discipline binding to the sources and aims of Islamic law and Prophetic tradition. Early Sufis were primarily concerned with the purification of the soul, upright moral behavior, and undivided loyalty to the Qur'an and Sunnah, so that their mystical experiences and poetic utterances remained validly contained within the orthodox parameters of Islamic belief. The research has shown that with the developments in Sufism, especially towards the later period of Sufism, new currents came into being characterized by the symbolic language, metaphorical expressions, and ecstatic motifs: the most apparent of them

being the poetry of Abu al-Hasan al-Shushtari. While these innovations in the arts nourished the spiritual and artistic sphere, they also generated considerable ambiguity, drawing criticism for passing the questionable line separating Islamic creed and law.

Such analysis of al-Shushtari's poetry shows both his creative adaptation of established Sufi motifs and the controversies they led to. Some of his verses have employed such symbols as wine, the cup, and the beloved Layla, inspired by earlier Sufi poets but at times pushing the limits of acceptable religious discourse. This early composition prevailed amidst the reigning rigor of classical linguistics and encompassed nontraditional vernacular earthiness; this was partly responsible for engendering al-Shushtari a unique widespread popularity among the masses but at the same time having idiotic scholarly censure imposed upon him. The article finds that such innovations incited underlying debates between the advocates of creative freedom concerning expression in Sufism and those espousing the need for doctrinal discipline.

In addition, the study also marks differences between early and later Sufism in terms of wider intellectual, behavioral, and stylistic diversity. The earlier Sufism emphasized humility, harmony in society, and didactic clarity-all usually couched in straightforward prose-while the later Sufism has adopted increasing poetic obscurity and symbolization, provoking unfortunate allegations of doctrinal deviation. All of these enhancements reveal a continuing struggle within Islamic society between the artistic freedom and the need for religious fidelity.

Recommendations

In the light of these findings, the study suggests that any future academic consideration of Sufi poetry and its methodological transformations should take into account a dual perspective that combines rigorous scholarly

critiques with respect for the ethical and doctrinal grounds of Islam. The researcher should guard against the allure of recognizing literary ingenuity or aesthetic novelty-but in doing so, forgets clarity of faith and jurisprudence. Sufis, by necessity, should therefore be analyzed not just for their artistic and philosophical merit, but also for their conformity to the established tenets of Islamic belief and practice.

The study equally stresses the necessity of approaching discussions on controversial Sufi poets like al-Shushtari with objectivity and caution. The research must neither unconditionally commend Sufi poetry nor impart outright disdain to it, but draw attention to aspects of the genre with literary merit and those carrying possible theological risks. Future studies should examine the reception and impact of different Sufi poetry throughout history and contexts, in particular how scholars and communities have negotiated their struggle between the spirit of creativity and the constraints of doctrine.

Ultimately, the advancement of scholarship in this field depends upon methodological rigor, intellectual honesty, and an enduring respect for the foundational tenets that have shaped the Islamic tradition across centuries.

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