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The Mystical Madmen: Paulo Coelho, Kahlil Gibran and their Sufism

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Abstract:

This paper examines the influence of Sufism in the writings of Kahlil Gibran and Paulo Coelho. It also attempts the comparative study of these two writers. The study examines the similarities between Coelho and Gibran in their use of Sufi concept, their understanding of spiritual experiences and Sufi Mysticism. Kahlil Gibran was an immigrant Arab American who was influenced by the Sufi writers as it was part of his curriculum at school in

Lebanon. However, the South American writer Paulo Coelho was culturally distant from Sufism or Kahlil Gibran, their spiritual and mystical affinity traverse exceptionally. They have dealt with the themes that are universally appealing and have dressed their own philosophy in stories. Their books are taken as a spiritual companion or guide. The mystical features in their books are spiritual-moral in nature. Inspired by the teachings of Christ, Sufism and other religions, they dive deeper into human existence to provide greater insights and higher meaning and purpose to humans.

Keywords: Sufism, Tasawwuf, Mysticism, Spirituality, The Alchemist. The Prophet,

1. Introduction:

1.1 Sufism:

Islamic spirituality is also known through Sufi tradition. Ahmed Ibn Ajiba Alhasani Almaghribi, the Moroccan scholar summarized 'Sufism' as the science and means to travel towards The Almighty.

"Its beginning is knowledge; its middle is action, and its finality is the exquisite gift from God." (sufiway.org)¹

It is about purification of defects prevalent inside and replacing them with good qualities. It is a method to find the Truth. One of the core Islamic practices has always been Sufism. It is about peace, love and oneness of God. Sufism or Tasawwuf is also referred to as Islamic Mysticism. The substance of Sufism is the actualization of the Truth. The practice of Sufism is the intention to go towards the truth by means of love and devotion. The Sufi moves towards the Truth by means of devotion and love because Sufi is a lover of Truth. Sufi is removed from all except the Truth. Sufism is a school for the actualization of divine ethics. It neither involves an intellectual proof nor logic; but an enlightened inner being, revelation and witnessing. To explain the Truth is indeed a difficult task. It is difficult to explain the Unbound, the Absolute when it is restricted by

¹ *The Sufi Way*. n.d. webpage. 18 11 2018. <<https://thesufiway.co.uk/islamic-spirituality/>>

words. Thus, for those who are imperfect, words create doubt and misunderstanding. Junayd Al-Baghdadi, the leader of school of mysticism in Iraq in 910 A.D, says,

.....*Sufism is to possess nothing and to be possessed by nothing.* (Abū Naṣr as-Sarrāj. Kitāb al-luma' fi'l-taṣawwuf)²

It is sacrificing one's soul. However, it not done merely by fasting and praying. It is through the generosity of the soul and the security of the heart. It is reaching the God, leading to the vision of The Almighty, through spiritual life, attainment of spiritual values and self-transformation. It is in the image of God that man is created.

There are three meanings to tasawwuf provided by the Sufis. First is the Shari'a, the law followed by the Muslims. Second, the mystical path known as tariqa. Lastly, haqiqa, the Truth. The purification happens on different levels. The immorality and the lower qualities are purified first. Then the purification from bondages. Finally, the purification on the level of attributes.

Another concept in Sufism is Marifa which literally translates to recognition or knowledge. It is used by Sufis for intuitive knowledge, the mystical knowledge, knowledge that spiritual truth will not be revealed through rationality acquired but it can be reached through ecstatic experiences. The spiritual state reached after dhikr (remembrance) is called Hal. Hal and Maqamat (station or literal meaning rank) are not generated by any specific technique but they are considered as gifts from God. Another aim of a Sufi is to reach Fanaa, which means annihilation. To realise God, the Sufi is ready to annihilate 'the self.' Where physically he alive but is his self is annihilated. To reach this state Sufi get rid of all attributes of the flesh and evil deeds.

In Islam, there are three qualities to a human. They are intelligence, free will and speech. Through intelligence, man professes the faith that 'there is no God but Allah' i.e., Shahadah. Man accepts the Absolute leading him towards the way of salvation. Free will exists so man can conform to the will of the God. Speech is a means of communication. It is prayers and in Sufism it is dhikr that makes the man aware of the Absolute. The awareness of the Absolute leads back to will and intelligence and therefore to their essence.

2. Paulo Coelho:

Paulo Coelho (1947-) is a Brazilian writer, most famous for his spiritual book *The Alchemist*.³ Born in 1947 to Pedro Coelho de Souza, an engineer and his mother Lygia Coelho de Souza, thrice he was sent to an asylum for being a rebellious teenage who would fight for his choices in

² Nicholson, Reynold A. *The Mystics of Islam* by London: Routledge. 1914. P. 25

³ Coelho, Paulo. *The Alchemist*. Trans. Alan R. Clarke. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008.

life. At an early age, he started writing. His parents didn't want him to be a writer. After getting out of the asylum he was enrolled into a law school. He knew law was not for him. With no parental vigilance, Paulo Coelho found his personal freedom by entering a new world where he can consume every kind of drug. Between 1973 and 1982 Paulo Coelho composed 120 songs together with Raul Seixas (1945-89)⁴. Coelho was part of the age of Hippies which believed in love and peace and their love for drugs, sex and Rock and Roll. Protesting his country's military rule, he wrote songs. They were played by Brazilian musicians. For his songs and political activism, he was sent to jail three times. He was wrongly accused and arrested by the then Brazilian dictator government in 1969 and was physically tortured for a week.

In his twenties, he was divorced twice. He went to the UK to fulfill his dream of becoming a writer. But going away from home didn't help and he ended up getting divorce a second time. Coelho met Christina Oiticica, his current life partner in 1968. They decided to travel Europe in the year 1981. While travelling, in Germany, Coelho visited a concentration camp. It was here that he felt an energy and a sign that his life is going to change. He met a man he referred as J in his autobiography who invited him to be a member of RAM. RAM is a catholic order that stand for Regnus Agnus Mundi⁵. He accepted and J became his Master and, on his orders, he journeyed to the road to Santiago in Spain. The route starts in France at Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port and ends in Spain at Santiago de Compostela which covers seven hundred kilometers. He claimed that he walked most of the journey for months. There are also claims that he rode a comfortable taxi and is lying. However, Coelho asked his readers to believe whatever version they want to believe. He wrote his experience of this journey in his first book *The Pilgrimage*⁶. Coelho completed that book in two weeks. In this book, Coelho tells how one can take an inner journey by taking a physical journey or a Personal Legend. He described himself as a Magus⁷. He also believes that anyone who is following his Personal Legend and can read the Language of the Soul, is a Magus. He returned to the faith of his family and reconverted to Christianity. After the Pilgrimage, Coelho has embarked on the path to his spiritual development. He published his second book *The Alchemist* that established him as a writer with a worldwide reputation. This book is considered by many as a classic and a timeless as it will keep on inspiring generations to

⁴ Raul Santos Seixas was a Brazilian rock composer, singer, songwriter and producer. He is sometimes called the "Father of Brazilian Rock" Arias, Juan. Paulo Coelho: Confessions of a Pilgrim. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001. P. 49

⁵ RAM stands for Regnus Agnus Mundi, which is translated as "Lamb of the Kingdom of the World - or Rigour, Adoration and Mercy" RAM is a spiritual tradition that is about 500 years old and was born in the heart of the Catholic Church. It is known as the "feminine way" and aims at revealing the feminine side of the personality of a person. However, there is no record of this order within Catholic Church which suggests it can be literary creation of Paulo Coelho.

⁶ Coelho, Paulo. *The Pilgrimage*. Trans. Alan Clarke. London: Harper Collins, 2017.

⁷ A member of a priestly caste of ancient Medes or Persia, also, a sorcerer.

come. His books are translated in 82 languages. They are published in more than 170 countries and sold hundreds of millions of copies and read by 600 million people worldwide.⁸

3. Kahlil Gibran:

Nadeem Naimy (1930-) said that an emigrant is an alien but an emigrant who is a mystic poet is thrice alienated.⁹ Breaking out from the restrictions of the literature of his land, travelling to a western world, deeply influenced by American Transcendentalist and English romantics, Gibran Kahlil Gibran became the man called Immortal Prophet of Lebanon. He not just condemned the social policies and ideas of institutional religion, but he wrote from spiritual and aesthetic dimension of human nature and the mysteries of spiritual experiences of an individual. English speaking world knows Gibran because of his book 'The Prophet¹⁰', published in 1923. After Shakespeare and Lao-Tzu, Gibran is the third most read poet. No other Arab writer has achieved the international reputation Gibran has, as an artist, as a writer and the number of millions of people he has reached through his books.

Kahlil Gibran preached love and peace to the world. Gibran was a poet, a prophet and a philosopher. He is better known for writing about wisdom, love, beauty, simplicity but most importantly he was a mystic writer. He searched for man's purpose on this earth. He was not hesitant in asking questions about the origin of humans and where do they return? He constantly battled with the questions of existentialism, life & death and human nature and relationships. One can find in his writings that he was a believer in love and humanity. He propounded that humans are responsible for their destiny and it's their choices which makes it. We have to coexist with other humans and life is an amalgamation of sufferings and bliss. Gibran has drawn metaphors from nature. These metaphors and similes were written in simple words. They draw the reader in and spark their imagination leading to realization of self and world around.

Gibran was fifteen when he was sent back to Lebanon to learn his country's culture, heritage and traditions. In Lebanon, he was enrolled in a Maronite-founded school, Madrasat-al-Hikmah. Gibran learned Bible, Arabic, and French and excelled in Poetry. With a fellow classmate he started a student magazine and was also elected 'College Poet.' He read Eastern scholars like Avicenna, Ghazali and Ibn al-Farid. Gibran's attention went to an article on 'nafs' by Avicenna. Avicenna was a Muslim thinker who later chose mystical life and Sufism. Gibran found his own

⁸ Boone, Ezekiel. Nine books that sold more than 100 million copies and how they compare to my book. Penguin Random House Canada. n.d. webpage. 21 October 2020. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/532/nine-books-sold-more-100-million-copies-and-how-they-compare-my-book> .

⁹ Naimy Nadeem. The Mind and Thought of Khalil Gibran. Journal of Arabic Literature 5(1). P. 55

¹⁰ Gibran, Kahlil. The Prophet. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925.

views on self and faith similar to that of Avicenna. Gibran compares the 11th century Persian philosopher Ghazali to St. Augustine, the famous Roman theologian. According to these two writers, 'self' travels from superficial to reason, from reason to philosophy and then to the godlike self. Gibran considers Ghazali to be a link to theologians and the Indian mysticism. Gibran was attracted to Ibn al-Farid as he was the only poet who connected the culture to mystical human experiences and aspects of life.

Gibran was not just a poet who talked about nature, justice and existential depth, but he was also a mystic who approached life from a philosophical point of view. It's only this life through living every moment that we bring joy to ourselves. It's the "I" awakened in us that reaches the inner most "I" that brings ecstasy and happiness to us. In *The Prophet*, through his mouthpiece Almustafa, Gibran makes human existence in this earthly world and that of the world of higher truth one and the same, not just for Almustafa, but by doing this he fulfills his longing for his perfect harmony of these two worlds.

4. Sufism, Coelho and Gibran:

The ideas of Sufism that are borrowed by these two writers may seem like they are not offering anything new. However, they are put forward in such rhythm and words that they are almost as new. As Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins write, Gibran's-

*"...aphorisms, parables, and allegories closely resemble Sufi wisdom—the themes of paradox and illusion turning on the un-ripeness of a sleeping humanity attached to the ephemeral"*¹¹ (*Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet*, 116)

Gibran was deeply influenced by the Eastern philosophers that honed his Sufi wisdom. In his books he tried to re-vision Christianity in the light of Sufi mysticism. This was realised in the character of Almustafa, where he is considered as a meeting point of Eastern and western culture and spiritual traditions. In his *Madman*, he explores the Sufi principle of Wahadat-al-Wujud.

"Then we left that sea to seek the Greater Sea." (*The Greater Sea, The Madman*, 262)¹²

The Sufi concept of greater self is symbolically presented by Gibran through the greater sea. He also talked about how to find the Greater self by discarding other lower selves. He also used the concept of madness, as the madman in Sufism is also referred as the 'crazed saint.' To Gibran madness is 'a state of illumination.' In his first parable *The Madman*, he talks about how the thief stole the madman's seven masks and left his face naked. The naked face of the madman free of any mask represents his shedding of all selves that he found his true self. In another parable *The*

¹¹ Bushrui, Suheil and Joe Jenkins. *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet*. Oxford: Oneworld publications, 1998.

¹² Gibran, Kahlil. *The Madman: His Parables and Poems*. New Delhi: Jainco Publishers, 2007. P. 262

Seven Selves, the narrator's seven selves at night discuss their pitiful and miserable life and think about rebellion. Sufi tradition believes in seven stages to develop inner Self. The six selves are lower selves while the seventh self is the Greater self. He embraces the nothingness and realises that he is empty of human motives, he is beyond the joy, sorrow, thoughts, hatred, love, and work.

Coelho believed in building bridges among different cultures. He has been influenced by different religions, different cultures and he accepted everything with open arms. Talking about Islamic teachings and Sufism he says,

"Islam has a lot of fantastic stories and they transmit a lot of teachings through stories, but when you want someone to understand something that is not forcefully in your culture, you use stories. The Sufis, they have their master of story-telling and [the same in] Arab culture: You can go back to Arabian Nights, [which] had a huge influence on me, Scheherazade and all the other stories, so then I started understanding and loving Arab culture."¹³ (Paulo Coelho's interview with theislamicmonthly.com)

He was the first western writer who was officially invited to visit Iran since the Islamic Revolution. "I looked at all the Iranians that came for my lecture. I looked in their eyes and realised we all share the same faith and I could see the hope for living in a better world."¹⁴

In his book *The Zahir*^{15,16}, he delves into the Islamic concept of *zahir* (the evident) and *batin* (the intrinsic). Sufis believe that the *batin* that is intentions of the heart have to be purified in order to have a better *zahir* that is the actions of an individual. Borges in his short story writes. In order to lose themselves in God, the Sufis repeat the ninety-nine names of God until the names mean nothing anymore. I long to travel that path. (Borges, 1969, p. 249)¹⁷

Inspired by his short story, Coelho's *The Zahir* was named as the novel of obsession. The narrator's wife left him. He assumes that she went missing. He obsesses over finding her. He searches for her for 10 years. However, later he finds out that she indeed has left him because she wanted to find her *Zahir* and wanted him to find his. At the end the narrator realizes,

¹³ Interview with Paulo Coelho: Best-selling author of *The Alchemist*. An interview of Paulo Coelho with Amina Chaudary. *The Islamic Monthly*. 2014 retrieved from <https://www.theislamicmonthly.com/interview-with-paulo-coelho-best-selling-author-of-the-chemist/>

¹⁴ Paulo Coelho: *The Alchemist of Words*. A documentary by Discovery Networks. 2001. retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zhYCBpBt-w&t=2386s>

¹⁵ Coelho, Paulo. *The Zahir: A Novel of Obsession*. Trans. Margaret Jull Costa. London: Harper Collins, 2006.

¹⁶ According to Coelho, "Zahir, is something that is incapable of going unnoticed. It is someone or something which, once we have come into contact with them or it, gradually occupies our every thought, until we can think of nothing else. This can be considered either a state of holiness or of madness."

¹⁷ Borges, Luis Borges. *The Aleph and Other Stories*. New Delhi: Penguin Classics, 2004. P. 249

"Although I know that I may have lost forever the woman I love, I must try to enjoy the graces that God has given me today..... If I do not make full use of these blessings, I will lose them forever." (The Zahir, p. 292)¹⁸

His wife Esther too realises that she has discovered love that later answers all the questions the narrator had in his quest.

...my heart was at the service of myself and of God, and not at the service of others. (The Zahir, p. 294)¹⁹

In his book *Veronika Decides to Die* a Sufi Master named Nasrudin²⁰ is invited to give a lecture to the patients of the asylum. Nasrudin teach them some Sufi techniques and meditation. Coelho too explored the concept of madness. Even the great Sufi master Nasrudin was called mad for his actions. No matter how wise he was, the sane never understood his teachings. His madness was that of crazed saint.

The religious life in Islam and its mystical interpretation can be found in Sufism. Though, Sufism only attempts to interpret it. It is just one way to find the mystical path to find the union with God. The esoteric and the spiritual aspects of Sufism has influenced literature and performing arts and it continues to influence many. Gibran and Coelho were deeply influenced by Sufism and the Sufi writers. Christian mysticism and Sufism formed the poetic inspirations for Gibran's works. He writes about Love in *The Prophet*,

*Love has no other desire but to fulfill itself.
But if you love and must needs have desires, let these be your desires:
To melt and be like a running brook that sings its melody to the night.
To know the pain of too much tenderness.
To be wounded by your own understanding or love,
And to bleed willingly and joyfully..." (The Prophet, 6)²¹*

It is the passion for the divine through love that a Sufi look for when he starts his quest for God. It is through passion of love that he is guided in every stage of his worldly existence. It is through passion of love for the divine that he no more desires the worldly comforts and recognise nothing but the divine. he continues,

*"When love beckons to you, follow him,
though his ways are hard and steep." (The Prophet, 7)²²*

However, the path for the mystics towards Divine love is filled with hardships.

¹⁸ Coelho, Paulo. *The Zahir: A Novel of Obsession*. Trans. Margaret Jull Costa. London: Harper Collins, 2006. P. 292

¹⁹ Coelho, Paulo. *The Zahir: A Novel of Obsession*. Trans. Margaret Jull Costa. London: Harper Collins, 2006. P. 294

²⁰ Mulla Nasreddin was Turkish born satirist, Sufi considered wise man whose tales are famous for being witty and humorous. The stories are adapted to teach the Sufi Way.

²¹ Gibran, Kahlil. *The Prophet*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925. P. 6

²² Gibran, Kahlil. *The Prophet*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925. P. 7

*Like sheaves of corn he gathers you unto himself.
 He threshes you to make you naked.
 He sifts you to free you from your husks.
 He grinds you to whiteness.
 He kneads you until you are pliant;
 And then he assigns you to his sacred fire (The Prophet, 7)²³*

Almustafa describes the unity with God. The nakedness can be seen as stripping of materialistic ego. Similarly, sifting from husks, grinding and kneading can be referred to the purification and the progress of the soul on the path of Divine Love. The sacred fire is nothing but the longing (Shauq of the Sufis) for the Beloved. Almustafa warns the seekers that if they only seek love's pleasure and peace than they better not choose the path that may perish them in the sun. However, seekers who knows that the will of his and his Beloved are the same, they do not fear any affliction. The annihilation of ego-self and unity with the Truth is the final stage for the mystics. As the Sufi mystics call it Fanaa, annihilation of the personal will and the individual consciousness and the ego is the final stage to purify and reach the Divine Love. The path towards God will lead the self to merge with Him. Similar to what Gibran propounded Coelho also believes that love can heal and transform but it can also destroy the one who has completely surrendered to God. Through The Copt he says,

"Love is an act of faith, not an exchange.... we need love even when it takes to the land of tears – that secret, mysterious place." (Manuscript Found in Accra, 80-81)²⁴

And this love will lead us to the destined place that is undreamed of, where there are no tears because despite pain, they have decided to keep their hearts open.

Gibran believed that men can discover their inherent divinity. They are capable because they are the spirit of divinity in this world. Like Rumi he believes that true light comes from within, therefore, there is greater power of the soul. The mystical reunion with God brings self-fulfillment.

"... the spirit become separated from the greater spirit to move in the world matter and pass as a cloud over the mountain of sorrow and plains of joy to meet the breeze of death and return whence it came. To the ocean of Love and Beauty- to God." (Tears and laughter, 4)²⁵

where the Ocean of Love and Beauty is God. Coelho also believed in the saying of Rumi that true light comes from within. He writes in Manuscript Found in Accra. They were trying to reflect what

²³ Gibran, Kahlil. *The Prophet*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925. P. 7

²⁴ Coelho, Paulo. *Manuscript Found in Accra*. Trans. Margaret Jull Costa. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013. P. 80-81

²⁵ Gibran, Kahlil. *Tears and Laughter*. Ed. Martin L. Wolf. Trans. Anthony Rizcallah Ferris. New York: Philosophical Library, 1947. P.4

came from outside, forgetting that the brightest light comes from within. (Manuscript Found in Accra, 67)²⁶

In another sermon of The Prophet, Reason and Passion, Gibran speaks about human efforts to reach God using reason and passion.

"...and let it direct your passion with reason, that your passion may live through its own daily resurrection, and like the phoenix rise above its own ashes." (The Prophet, 46)²⁷

As his soul continuously tries that he gets completely absorbed in infinite, which is the Sufi concept of Fanaa. It is also remarkably like the Nirvana from Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The Prophet brings forth the knowledge of universe and illuminates the human minds as it shows the path of divine knowledge. He urges everyone to accept the role of fate and surrender to the will of ever-lasting soul.

6. Conclusion:

The phenomenon called life has been treated as mysterious and complex. However, the mysteries and this complexity called life has been simplified by these two writers. People find everything written on the pages of these books relatable and find their life in them. After reading the timeless and universal truths written in these books, they forgo their spiritual shallowness.

Gibran and Coelho, using characters and themes that are universally appealing, dress their own philosophy in stories. Their books are taken as a spiritual companion or guide as the thoughts and ideas revolve around love, purpose and meaning of life, dreams, the self and the creator.

The mystical features in Gibran and Coelho's books are spiritual-moral in nature. Inspired by the teachings of Christ, Sufism and other religions, they dive deeper into human existence to provide greater insights and higher meaning and purpose to humans. They give the message of love that opens the hearts and helps in embracing the spiritual growth. They have a mystic's vision that led them to the path of the Divine.

Their books provide spiritual insights and prophetic visions, not just for the contemporary readers but also for the future generations to come. They have propounded that the man is sent on this earth to find his spiritual and mystical quest towards 'the infinite.' It is within one's heart to find his spiritual awakening. They believed that man needs to explore and go in an inner journey to find his true self, his Greater Self.

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²⁶ Coelho, Paulo. Manuscript Found in Accra. Trans. Margaret Jull Costa. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013. P. 67

²⁷ Gibran, Kahlil. The Prophet. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925. P. 46

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