

UNDERSTANDING RABI'AH BASARI'S SUFI THOUGHT WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON DIVINE LOVE

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ABSTRACT

The profound spiritual message of Islam, centered around love and peace, has been illuminated by eminent Sufis and mystics since the early stages of Islamic history. This spiritual trajectory can be traced back to the circle of companions (*Asbab-i Sufa*) of Prophet Muhammad (SAAS). Over time, there has been a discernible shift in focus, with individuals increasingly neglecting the spiritual dimensions of life and emphasizing material pursuits, sometimes unrelated to the essence of the religion. In response, Sufis have earnestly strived to revive spiritual ideals among the general populace, particularly within the Muslim community. In response, Sufis, including Rabi'ah Basari, a prominent female Sufi in the 8th century, have actively sought to revive spiritual ideals. Rabi'ah's contributions, manifested through her conceptual elucidations of religious ideas and the establishment of Sufi doctrines, have played a pivotal role in fostering selflessness and sincerity in the pursuit of Divine love. This paper employs a conceptual, analytical, and historical methodology to explore Rabi'ah Basari's Sufi ideology and her enduring impact on the development of spiritual and ethical standards of life.

Key Words: Rabi'ah Basari; Divine Love; Sidq; Tawbah.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sufism is the term generally used for *Tasawwuf* of Islamic spiritual tradition and the Sufi refers to a Muslim mystic/saint. *Tasawwuf* mainly deals with the spiritual thoughts and practices of a Muslim. *Tasawwuf* is a religious practice in which people search for truth, knowledge, and nearness to Allah through meditation and prayer. *Tasawwuf* is recognized to have been a significant instrument in not only spreading Islam but also in shaping the Muslim civilization in different parts of the globe. The term *Tasawwuf*/Sufism usually represents the practices of a Sufi in connection with Allah. The term (Sufi) despite

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bearing many etymological derivations, refers to perfect 'spiritual adepts' and is reported to have been coined as early as in 2nd century A.H. The particular type of piety and markedly unique mode of pious living by the Sufis was most commonly referred to by the name *tasawwuf*. The Sufi way of life became the part of the Islamic tradition and civilization. Every century, we find Sufis who played their important role in the dissemination of Islamic message based on love, coexistence, and peaceful living. The dissemination of peaceful Islamic message into the major parts of the world became the motivational force for the Sufis of Islam. Several Sufis played an important role in the formation and development of life based on spiritual discipline in Islam but the path formed and developed by Rabi'ah al-Adawiyyah/Basariyyah, the woman Sufi of Basrah is unprecedented in the Muslim history of *Tasawwuf* because of her Divine love, integrity, patience, and moral code of life.

Rabi'ah Basari is known in the history of Islamic civilization by different names such as *Rabi'ah al-Adawiyyah*, *Rabi'ah Basariyyah* and *Rabi'ah al-Qaisiyah* who was born in 95 A.H./713 C.E at Basrah in Iraq.ⁱ She belonged to a poor family; her father named Ismail died when she was young. Her father had already three daughters, and she was the fourth one because of which her name was kept as Rabi'ah (fourth). When she became an orphan, it is said that she was kidnapped and was sold in a market for six silver pieces and then after lived a life of slavery. From the very beginning, she possessed the qualities of chastity, contentment, and piety. She knew quite early in life what was *halal* (permitted or religiously licit), and *haram* (religiously forbidden). She was very much influenced by the righteous people of religion and often quoted the sayings of them in order to advise and educate the people. She was quick to absorb everything whatever she heard of religious ideas and prayer.ⁱⁱ Good manners were natural to her. One evening her family was enjoying the dinner but Rabi'ah seemed uninterested in the food. Her father asked, 'what is the matter, Rabi'ah, why you are not eating?' she answered sorrowfully, 'I don't know father, if this food is *halal* (lawful or admissible to eat) or not'.ⁱⁱⁱ Margaret Smith a noted orientalist and an authority on Sufism claims that Rabi'ah was unique, because in her relations with God and her knowledge of things Divine, she had no equal. Further, he claims that she was deeply venerated by all the great Sufis of her time.^{iv}

During her period, Basrah witnessed a popular Sufi saint Hasan al-Basari (642-728 CE) but it is not confirmed whether Rabi'ah met him or not. Al-Jahiz (d. 868 CE), another contemporary Sufi of her period points out that she was in close contact with other female Sufis of her period. He deliberated upon the Sufi life of Rabi'ah and stated that she was known for refusing all worldly things, her love was for Allah alone, uninterested in marriage, and the greed of gaining paradise or to fear from hell would distract her from Allah. Approximately four hundred years later a Persian Sufi Farid al-

Din Attar depicted Rabi'ah as possessing miraculous powers and a biting wit, in addition to her deep piety.^v Taking a critical note on some Sufi doctrines of Rabi'ah, an Egyptian feminist writer Leila Ahmad depicted her as a social rebel because the women are imitating her role and doctrines in order to free themselves from the biological roles (like marriage, producing children, and other social responsibilities).^{vi} Her Sufi life is very much different from the life of other Sufis of Islam. She preferred the ascetic life over the social life and her ideas seems anti-social to the progressive and empirical Muslims while as her Sufi thoughts have gained prominence among the major Sufi circles of both Muslim as well as non-Muslim world.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Man in this universe is in need of two entities, profane and sacred. In the materialistic world everything is judged by its utility value while as the spiritual values are being ignored. The profane can be achieved by utilizing the resource material available in the world but the spiritual aspect of human life is directly proportional to sacred means of religious observances or activities propounded in any religious texts. Same is the case with Islam; it too develops the spiritual dimensions among its followers by strictly adhering to the teachings of Islam. But, generally it has been observed that the spiritual way of life have been overemphasized by the Sufi saints of Islam since the early period of history. Rabi'ah Basari, the women saint of 8th century had also developed several Sufi/mystical doctrines and thoughts by emphasizing the selfless love with Allah. Through her sayings and religious observances; she conceptually explains and develops the Sufi thoughts among the Sufi personalities of her period. The present study is undertaken to highlight the ideas and sayings of Rabi'ah conceptually especially with respect to her Divine love of Allah. Her sayings and doctrines as enshrined into the Sufi literature may be evaluated. Furthermore, her ideas and doctrines with regard to the Sufic way of life are described in this study by evaluating the existing literature on *Tasawwuf*/Sufism. This study is helpful in understanding and enriching the spiritual ethos among the people in general and Muslims in particular in this materialistic world.

3. RABI'AH'S VIEWPOINT ON MARRIAGE

Marriage is the basic social institution of any civilization. Islam guarantees it and protects it with utmost care because it is considered to be the base of social order besides religiously acknowledged. Rabi'ah was the woman Sufi who totally ignored marriage but for herself only. She had described the aspect of marriage into the optional category of

religious observances. She totally co-relates it with the existence of being and ignored it on the grounds that she had not achieved such existence. Such explanation of *nafs* (being) with its co-related aspects is based on her own conceptual understanding rather than having accreditation in the religious texts. She got many proposals of marriage from the contemporary Sufis, but she replied them in a way that they didn't get courage to propose her again. It has been put on record that somebody asked Rabi'ah for marriage. She replied, *'He alone is entitled to marry who owns himself and has an existence which is his own. I am neither the master of my body nor of my life but they are the properties of my Lord. Ask Him for my hand (in marriage)'*.^{vii} It is said that Hasan al-Basari had also proposed her by saying, *'why you are not going to marry'*. She replied, *'I haven't any Wujud (existence) how can I marry in this world'*.^{viii} It has been put on record that the Prince of Basrah, Muhammad the son of Sulaiman al-Hashmi was in search of a girl for marriage, he asked his people that who were the worthiest of woman to marry; and he learnt from many recommendations that it was Rabi'ah al-Adawiyyah. So, he presented himself to her, and said:

I have an income of 10,000 dinars (gold pieces) monthly; I will make it all yours. She answered him in writing: Ascetism in the world is a comfort to the body and the mind. Desire brings sadness and pain. So, prepare your provision bag and make ready for your passing. Take charge of your own affairs; don't let others act as trustees of your will so that they may soon divide inheritance between them. Fast in this world, and make death your hour of breaking the fast. As for me, if God were to bestow upon me a fortune such as you have gained, or it's multiple, it would not please me or divert me from seeking God for the twinkling of an eye.^{ix}

Another Sufi of that time Abdul Wahid son of Zayd, asked for Rabi'ah's hand in marriage. She avoided him also. At another time when she was asked why she didn't marry, she answered:

There are three things that cause me to be saddened: if anyone could relieve me of them, I would marry. What were these three things, she was asked? She replied, 'first, if I die, would I be able to present my faith purely? Second, on the Day of Judgment would I be able to present my Book of Deeds with my right hand? And finally, when the day of Requital came and the righteous were to go to Heaven and the wicked to Hell, with which group would I be?' The questioner could only reply: 'I do not know about any of the things you asked, God alone could ever know that'. To which Rabi'ah replied, 'If that is the case, while I am so worried about these questions, how can I marry and fulfill the obligations?'^x

Rabi'ah believed that there might be the closest and tenderest relation between the soul and God. She believed that spirit had come from God and must return to Him. She

was asked, “where she had come from?” she replied, “from that other world”. Again, she was asked, “Where are you going?” she replied, “to that other world”.³¹ Therefore, it can be ascertained from her statements that nothing belongs to humans and everything from this world will return to Allah.

Such proposals of marriage to Rabi'ah clearly show that she did not consider herself incline towards marriage because according to her she did not possess any existence of her own. Such was the level of her love with Allah. There are two different approaches found in her Sufi thought pertaining to marriage, first is, she conceptually explained marriage in relation with existence and ignored it on the basis that it became hindrance in the process of love with Allah. But the fact is that marriage is such an important social institution which cannot be neglected on such mystical basis. Second is that the biological need of human being could not be overlooked on the basis of love with Allah rather the love of human beings each other directly or indirectly motivates people towards the love of the creator (Allah). Notwithstanding, it can be ascertained from her Sufi life that the material achievements or worldly pursuits are not enough for the happiness or prosperity of human being rather the love of Allah and the strengthening of other spiritual aspect of life is having utmost importance besides worldly pursuits. Marriage is a social institution acknowledged by both worldly and spiritual aspects of life. Furthermore, it can be ascertained from such discussion that the two pursuits of life (profane and sacred) shall be put into practice in a balanced way in order to lead a good, spiritual, and moral social life.

4. POETRY OF RABI'AH BASARI

Rabi'ah was not only a Sufi woman; she knew the poetic skills as well. She disseminated the thought and teachings of Islam through poetic verses. Her conceptual understanding of the ideas pertaining to spiritual life of Muslims can be ascertained from her poetic couplets. She always wanted to remain in close contact with the blessings of Allah and she equally co-related that the worldly aspects of life like marriage, friendship, and all other such institutions directly impacts or became hindrance in the selfless love of Allah. The verses in which she invokes a blessing or a supplication to Allah are:

Oh my joy, my wish, my support,
My friend, my esteemed one and my intention,
You are the soul of my heart; you are my hope,
You are my comfort, and your desire is my food.
How many blessings you have given me, and pleasures and capacities,
Now your love is my desire and my heaven,
It is a clearance to my captured heart's eye.

As long as I may live I will not be apart from you,
 You are my strength when I am in darker mood.
 If you are pleased with me, then, oh my heart's desire,
 My happiness has begun.^{xii}

She often used to be in the company of Allah by dedicating each and every aspect of her life to Allah alone. She described that to understand the cause behind the secret of spiritual life or the spiritual elevation of a Sufi saint is to attach everything (happiness as well as miseries) to Allah's will. When she was asked about her solitude and contentment, and how she had left her friends, she said:

My comfort, o my brethren, is in my solitude,
 And my Beloved as always within my own presence.
 I have found no substitute for His love,
 And His love in the desert sands is my harrow.
 If I die of longing and he is still not satiated,
 Forsaking all creation, aspiring to your love-token, this truly is the quest I
 follow.^{xiii}

Rabi'ah categorised and distinguished between the two kinds of love i.e., selfish and selfless love through this verse:

In two ways have I loved Thee: selfishly,
 And with a love that worthy is of Thee.
 In selfish love my joy in Thee I find,
 While to all else, and others, I am blind.
 But in that love which seeks Thee worthily,
 The veil is raised that I may look on Thee.
 Yet is the praise in that or this not mine,
 In this and that the praise is wholly Thine.^{xiv}

Her Sufi thought and ideas achieved wide range of publicity through her poetic verses. The disciples of Rabi'ah were very much influenced by her poetic skills. They often used to listen her poetry and transmitted her Sufi thought and teachings to other people. Rabi'ah was very much unique in her Sufi doctrines and thoughts because of her understanding and explanation of divinity in the Sufi path of life.

5. SUFI DOCTRINES OF RABI'AH

5.1 DOCTRINE OF SELFLESS LOVE WITH ALLAH

Tasawwuf/Sufism in Islam is the combination of several doctrines propounded by the Sufis in order to realize the divinity and reality of Allah. They have emphasised on the

realization of Allah which according to them is the fundamental reality of Islam. According to Sufis, there are so many ways through which one can realize Allah. Masood Ali Khan quotes Shaiq al-Balkhi's (d. 810 CE) *Manazil al-Sidq* who mentions that there are four stages in the path of asceticism. The first stage is renunciation (*zuhd*), the second stage is fear (*khawf*), the third one is desire for heaven (*al-shawq ila al-janna*), and the fourth one is love of Allah (*al-mahabba li-llah*).^{xv} Rabi'ah had chosen the fourth stage of Sufi path which according to her is the highest and last degree in *Tasawwuf*/Sufism. She conceptually explains the doctrine of Divine love unlike other Sufi saints. Rabi'ah remained aloof from mundane and worldly matters. She connected herself and her soul only with Allah and ignored the worldly pursuits and pleasures. There are some episodes recorded by several academicians regarding Rabi'ah's renunciation of this worldly life for she desired to quench her thirst by attaching herself with the love of Allah only. One day Rabi'ah fell ill. People asked her the reason of her ailment. She said, "*My heart had one day leaned towards the attainment of Paradise, so the Lord inflicted this temporary punishment*".^{xvi} Regarding the intensity of selfless love, she said, "*A lover of God is one who is so lost in witnessing Him that nobody's consciousness remains in him, and he cannot distinguish between pain and comforts*".^{xvii} Rabi'ah insisted on the primacy of love in Sufism and repudiates the attachment with the creation. She clearly explained the confusion between the Creator (Allah) and created. When people spoke of the Holy Kabah in Makkah, she replied, "*It is the Lord of the House whom I need, what business have I with the house itself?*".^{xviii} It is further said that one day Rabi'ah sent three things to the great Sufi of her contemporary times named Hasan al-Basari: a lamp of wax, a needle, and a hair. These signified that be like the wax, illuminate without burning yourself; be like the needle, work without possessions; when the people do these a thousand years pass as lightly as a hair.^{xix}

Her selfless love with Allah did not depend on the rewards that may be conferred on her after pleasing Him but she loved Allah irrespective of gaining pursuits of paradise (*jannah*) and other rewards in this life and Hereafter. It is noted that she once said, "*I will not serve God like a labourer, in expectation of my wages*".^{xx} Furthermore, she was once asked whether she hated Satan, she said that she didn't and claimed, "*I love God, but I don't hate Satan. Love leaves no room for anything else in the heart*".^{xxi} Her Divine love was so intense that she used to pray that if she became selfish then deny her from His bounties. She prayed:

"Oh Lord!
If I worship you from fear of Hell, caste me into Hell,
If I worship you from desire of paradise, deny me Paradise".^{xxii}

Again, Rabi'ah used to pray:

O Lord! Whatever You desire to bestow on me in the world, confer it on my enemies; and whatever good You mean to confer on me of the other world, confer it on the faithful ones, as for me I seek Thee from Thee. Let

Heaven and Hell be denied to me, but deny not Thy vision to me.^{xxiii}

One day she was running quickly, carrying a bucket of water with one hand and a fire band with the other. On being asked, 'Where are you going, Rabi'ah?' She answered: 'to throw the fire to Heaven and to pour the water on Hell; so that these can no longer be a cause of worshipping Allah: nor will His creatures look to the Lord for material incentive or for spiritual reward.'^{xxiv} She was once questioned: 'God has crowned the heads of the saints with gifts of blessing, and their speech as well. How did you reach such a stage of sainthood?' She said: 'By both my words and my actions... God, I seek Your protection from all who divert me from You (God), and from anyone who becomes an obstacle between You and me!'^{xxv} Rabi'ah further said, "Everything has a fruit, and the fruit of divine knowledge is to come face to face with God- The Most High".^{xxvi} Once Rabi'ah was asked, 'what is the best thing by which the servant seeks nearness to God- The Most High?' She said, "He knows that servant loves nothing in this world or the next except God". She further added, "My sorrow is not because I am sorrowful, my sorrow is because I am not sorrowful".^{xxvii}

It can be ascertained from her sayings that she loved Allah unconditionally and unselfishly. The worldly bounties were nothing to her but Allah's favour and pleasure was the epitome of her Sufi thought. The Sufi thoughts and ideas propounded by Rabi'ah Basari puts less emphasis or more vehemently discredits the very nature of the foundations of material philosophy of life and pronounces that beyond material life there is a sort of life which can provide the everlasting contentment for the human soul based on the religious values. The atheistic trend has faced a great blow from such Sufi thought process of Rabi'ah Basari because their (atheist's) negation of God-oriented life could not put influence more on the religious-oriented life of the people. It is remarkably a great contribution of Rabi'ah of Basrah.

5.2 DOCTRINE OF SIDQ (TRUTHFULNESS)

Sidq (truthfulness) is one among the main teachings of Islam and other religions of the world. It has been greatly emphasized both in all the religious texts and equally propagated by the religious scholars. The Sufi explanation of truthfulness is mostly based on ethico-spiritual spirit. The philosophy of truthfulness based on religion had been disclosed conceptually by the ideas and sayings of Rabi'ah Basari. Her explanation of truthfulness is solely rooted with the love of Allah because truthfulness also leads towards the love of Allah. The friends of Rabi'ah came to see her and learn from her, they discussed and enquired into many things. Rabi'ah is believed to be proficient in all of the moral and spiritual virtues including truthfulness, critical self-awareness, devotion to Allah, and doctrinal expertise. On one occasion they talked about Sufism and worship. Sufyan al-Thawri, of Kufa (d. 161 A.H/778 C.E), al-Balkhi and Malik bin Dinar, the great Sufis of Islam were present along with other ascetics, Rabi'ah asked them, 'what is meant by

truthfulness'. One of them answered: "*He is not truthful in his claim who has not thanked God for His punishment*". Rabi'ah said nothing and showed no reaction. Turning to Malik bin Dinar, as if testing his understanding of the subtleties of expression, the other said: "*He is not truthful in his claims who have not enjoyed God's punishment*". Rabi'ah smiled, and said with a kind of joy, "*but there is, O Malik! a better thing than all of you have said...*" So, they immediately asked her, "*You say it then, and give us your opinion.*" She replied, "*He is not truthful in his claim who has not forgotten the punishment while seeing his Lord*". They all fell silent, submitting to her unsurpassed vision of Divine love.^{xxviii}

5.3 DOCTRINE OF TAWBAH (REPENTANCE)

In Islam, *tawbah* (repentance) means return to the path of Allah and perform ritualized acts of prayer and self-sacrifice in the hope of receiving forgiveness.^{xxix} It has been emphasized in Islam as the Qur'an comprises a complete surah i.e, *tawbah* in order to provide a chance to believers to return to the original position after conducting the unlawful practices. Rabi'ah said that *tawbah* (repentance) is the gift of Allah. She was once asked by an *enquirer*: "*I have incurred a great deal of sin. If I repent, will God forgive me?*" She answered: "*No; but if He were to forgive you first, then you would be able to repent.*"^{xxx} *Tawbah* is an integral component of faith in Allah. One should first win Allah's pleasure, by totally abstaining from wrong doing. She believed in abstaining totally from that sin, this would be in real sense a *tawbah*. Whenever one lacks sincerity, he is not pardoned. Rabi'ah said, "*I ask God's forgiveness for my lack of sincerity in asking His forgiveness*".^{xxxi} She further said, "*The signs of true repentance are remorse and a heart that is fearful, pure, and submissive- one that is a dwelling place for obedience*".^{xxxii}

It is the law of nature that every creation has a fall or can face the day of death. During the last days of Rabi'ah, she was inordinately ill as a result of exhaustion following her years of effort and dedication. Her body became exhausted but her heart remained conscious and awake. Rabi'ah ate but little during her last week of life. Although she was sick she was constantly occupied with prayer and fasting. During her last few days, she stopped taking food altogether. She felt the hour of death would soon come. She entrusted her friend and servant named Abdah, the daughter of Abu Shawwal, with the last task, to wrap her in the mantle she wore during her prayers, to cover her head with her black woolen veil, and asked her to speak to none about her death.^{xxxiii} Ultimately, Rabi'ah Basari died in her home town (Basrah) in 185 A.H or 801 C.E. It is being said that the stone of her grave is inscribed with the words "*Here lies the most pious woman*".^{xxxiv}

6 CONCLUSION

Rabi'ah Basari was the famous Sufi woman of Basrah during the 8th century C.E. She has been known to the world in general and Muslim world in particular for her spiritual knowledge, expertise in Islamic literature, and the unique doctrines of Sufi way of life. She has elevated the religious practices from the interest-oriented to disinterest-oriented ones because she ignored the love with Allah on the basis of gaining worldly pursuits. Her love with Allah was based on selfless nature. According to her, the existence of Allah and the pleasure of Allah only should be the wholesome objective of religious observances. Neither the worldly endowments, rewards, punishments, interest of gaining *Jannah* (heaven), and fear of *Jabannam* (hell fire) shall be taken into account while praying to Allah nor to gain Allah's favour for the worldly pursuits rather Allah shall be prayed without having any desire other than selfless love with Allah. Her conceptual explanation of Islamic teachings was unique in nature because her Sufi doctrines gained prominence day by day. Despite Allah mentioning such bounties in the Qur'an, she paid not even little attention to them because she claimed that the bounties were having origin with Allah, so what is the business with the bounties when one is successful in gaining Allah's favour directly. Her Sufi doctrines were unique in theory and practice and directly motivate the people to lead and observe the ascetic life. She enlightened the whole Iraq and the outside world through her Sufic thoughts and doctrines which were unique in their nature. She was counted by a Persian Sufi, Farid al-Din Attar as being among the greatest thinkers of her era. Her belief in Unity of Allah (*tauhid*), selfless love, universal brotherhood, truthfulness, patience, and love and affection for humanity made her one of the most popular woman Sufi both in and outside Basrah because her disciples disseminated her doctrines both in and outside the city of Basrah. She was the only Sufi who is remembered for her Divine love and the doctrines of *Tasawwuf*/Sufism based on selflessness and whose life had influenced the several saints/Sufis of the world in general and Muslim societies in particular. Therefore, during this catastrophic era of atheistic way of life, materialistic version of life, and the absence of ethico-spiritual life, the Sufi doctrines of Rabi'ah Basari based on Divine love are highly relevant in order to generate the moral and spiritual life among the people in general and Muslims in particular.

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