

Love as the Driving Force of Creation: Sufism in Ahmed Bahjat's "Abraham's Birds" from Animal Stories in the Qur'an

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Abstract

This paper explores the short story Abraham's Birds by the Egyptian writer Ahmed Bahjat as a Sufi piece of literature. The story is part of his collection Animal Stories in the Quran. The paper does not concern itself with questioning whether Bahjat is a Sufi himself or not; rather, it analyzes the artistic elements of the story: inspiration, way of writing, subject matter, style, language, and imagery in an attempt to prove that it is a piece of Sufi literature. A very short background about Sufism is given at the beginning.

Keywords

Sufism, Ahmed Bahjat, Animal Stories in the Qur'an, Sufi love, Sufi literature, Prophet Abraham

المخلص

يتناول هذا البحث قصة طير ابراهيم للكاتب المصري أحمد بهجت كنص من الأدب الصوفي. والقصة هي جزء من مجموعته الشهيرة قصص الحيوان في القرآن. لا يعني البحث بإثبات ما إذا كان أحمد بهجت نفسه متصوفاً أم لا، فهو نفسه لا يجيب علي هذا السؤال، ولكنها تحلل العناصر الفنية للقصة بدءاً من إلهام فكرتها، وطريقة كتابتها، مروراً بموضوعها وأسلوبها واللغة والتصوير، بهدف إثبات أنها جزء من التراث الصوفي. ويبدأ البحث بمقدمة قصيرة عن التصوف.

الكلمات الدالة

الصوفية، أحمد بهجت، قصص الحيوان في القرآن، الحب الصوفي، الأدب الصوفي، النبي ابراهيم

Introduction

Divine love is the cause, purpose and driving force of creation. The souls of men, mystics or non-mystics, can know God only through the mystical communion of love, and in this knowledge lies human salvation because the grace of Godly love bestows on the soul boundless happiness, indescribable joy and the certainty of true rest. These ideas are subtly but clearly realized when reading the short-story collection, *Qasas Alhayawan Fi Al Qur'an* (Animal Stories in the Qur'an) by Ahmed Bahjat (hence, ASQ). The collection is generally categorized as children's literature though Bahjat confessed that he never meant it to be. He understood, however, the reason behind this classification: animals

and children are always connected together. Moreover, the colorful illustrations that accompanied the stories and the book size all made this classification logical. (Bahjat, personal interview)

This paper does not concern itself with exploring whether Ahmed Bahjat is a Sufi or not. Rather, it reads his short story "Abraham's Birds" as a Sufi piece of literature and analyzes the characteristics that support this hypothesis. In fact, the popularity of the literary output of Sufism encourages critical work away from ideology. However, a general simple background about Sufism is given to enhance the readers' appreciation of the story.

Mysticism and Sufism sometimes overlap. Abbas Mahmoud Al-Aqad, the great Islamic thinker, handles the origin of the word mysticism in the western world and pinpoints its derivation from the word 'mystery' to mean puzzle, secrecy, or hidden meanings. The major characteristics of the mystic are adequate search in essences not surfaces and a constant exploration of metaphysical issues⁽¹⁾1 (Al-Akad 11). Sufism is Islamic mysticism, and it has different origins as will be shown later. Faith (in God as is understood from the context), based on love not fear, remains the major characteristic of Sufism. Al-Akad (115) believes that the spread of Sufism is natural in Islam more than in any other religion because it is the only creed that allows an independent relation between man and God (in the meaning that there are no mediators between them, no priest, no hierarchy, and no particular ceremonial rituals.)⁽²⁾ 2 Man can address God via his/her conscience urged by love: "When this is the case, and when the road is that open in front of a Moslem on the way of

love and independent conscience, nothing in his religion can prevent him from seeking divine wisdom or exploring hidden secrets (117).

Love, the hidden secrets, and one's relation to God, are the main themes of "Tayer Ibraheem" ("Abraham's Birds"). The narrator/protagonist of "Abraham's Birds" is a male dove; one of the four birds slain by Prophet Abraham—according to the Qur'anic version of the story—as commanded by God to rest his tormented heart concerning the point of resurrection. The story handles the bird's love story with his mate, his 3 love towards the whole universe, his slaughter and finally his insightful resurrection. Despite the fact that the theme is very old and widely covered in many texts before, Bahjat retells the story in a new manner: from the consciousness of the birds themselves. In the age when technological utopian dreams replace spiritual truths—when man is more lonely and miserable than ever—comes this lucid story, narrated by the birds themselves to refill some of our spiritual gaps with surprisingly familiar (though almost forgotten) ideas. Of the Qur'anic animals, Bahjat argues that though they played great roles in the history of humanity, "...the Qur'an mentioned them marginally or told only a part of their lives in quick flashes. The animals' very lives remained sinking in mystery" (ASQ, "Introduction" 8). In this collection, Bahjat fathoms the mystery of their lives .

Ahmed Bahjat's fiction is more than obsessed with Sufism as a subject matter and as an approach to life. Bahjat's literary Sufism, as shown in this collection, springs from his life-time fascination with animals and his undeniable infatuation with the Sufi literary tradition, particularly of the

Persian Sufi poet Jalaludden Rumi. The first trend explains the choice of the collection while the second is manifested in the artistic sides of the story .

Islamic mysticism (Sufism)

Sufism is a controversial concept that needs to be clearly defined first. Though it is difficult to define, Julian Baldick attempts this in his book, *Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism* :

Sufism is a mystical tradition which, when compared to Christian and European Institutions, could be put somewhere between monasticism and Freemasonry. It has many of the characteristics of monasticism, but does not usually preach celibacy. It does enjoin mortification of the flesh, and exalts the ideal of poverty, but it includes ordinary members of society in its ranks, with no distinction of clerical versus lay. It emphasizes the love of God, and teaches that God and the Sufis have a special relationship which goes back to a primordial Covenant: the Sufis are God's friends, perpetually engaged in remembrance (dhikr) of him. Sufism also constitutes a Pat (tariqa), which begins with repentance and leads through a number of 'stations' (maqamat), representing virtues such as absolute trust in God, to a higher series of ecstatic states' (ahwal). These culminate in the 'passing away; (fanaa) of the mystic (or perhaps just of the lower soul, or of his human attributes) and the subsequent "survival' (baqa) of his transformers personality (or perhaps just of his higher soul, or alternatively of his essence now adorned by the attributes of God.⁽³⁾ (3)

Sayed Hassan Nasr, in his *Sufi Essays*, defines Sufism as a journey from the inward to the outward. He pinpoints that in the Holy Quran Almighty God refers to Himself as the 'Outward' and the 'Inward'. The world as a reflection of God is the outward and has a reality of its own. But this reality implies a separation and a withdrawal from the principle that resides at the center. To be satisfied with living in the outward is to betray the very nature of man, the very reason he is created for. On the other hand, to take the journey from the outward to the inward is to move "from the periphery of the circle of existence to the transcendent centre and in so doing to return creation to its origin" (16). The idea of the journey is a recurrent theme in Sufi literature. Bahjat himself calls Prophet Abraham, the main figure in this short story, "the perpetual traveler to God" (ASQ 41). However, the Sufi road is not an actual road in the ordinary sense. Likely, Dr Badee M. Gomaa in his interpretation of Al Naysaboury's *Mantiq Al-tayer* (Birds Logic/Reason) explains:

The Sufi path is not a road in the literal sense of the word as the commoner perceive it, but it is a "way" to struggle and self-control. It looks like an earthly road because it consists of different stages, some easy, some dangerous....Not all the travelers on this road reach the end....The end of the Sufi way is to realize God. But what is their way to this? Do they realize Him by the intellect?" Attar totally refuses the ability of the mind to realize Him. The mind is unable to realize the universal truths, how come it can realize the creator?⁽⁴⁾ 4 (97)

Bahjat, in *Behaar Alhob E'nd Alsophiah* (*Sufism: Seas of Love*), believes in the strong existence of Sufism as a spiritual phenomenon, and in those elite people who are " the friends of God", or his "Walis" whose eyes could perceive high secrets permitted by God. He believes that Sufism is the art of recognizing God, which may take the Sufi to different and complicated paths and concepts like unity of existence and thus is confused with pantheism—mad love, dogmatization or religion.

The artistic expression of Sufism may take the form of secular love or may express itself in intriguing imagery and symbols. All in all, the only thread that was found to combine all the states of the Sufis is love (34). Bahjat is aware of the many attacks against Sufism, coming from both Orientalists who apply the rational science to a spiritual phenomenon and the religious men of Shariaa (Islamic Law) who see Sufism as a deviation from the Islamic Law. The following opinion is an example of these attacks.

Samih A. Elzien, in *Sufism in the View of Islam*, attacks Sufism as alien to Islam and destructive to its moderation and balance:

Islam and Sufism are therefore two contradictory trends: Islam is nothing but a realistic, positive understanding of the principle of power in life and the exercise of one's duties according to enlightened thought and in conformity with God's commands and interdictions. In his understanding and application of Islam, a Moslem wants to attain the ideal goal, that is, to please God .
(10.11)

In Elzien's viewpoint, Islam faces reality with orthodox behavior so that there is an agreement between man's action on one side, God's eternal word and the Prophet's Hadith on the other. This means that Islam unites principle and practice exactly as the Qur'an unites faith and good deeds. In contrast, Sufism, based on philosophic and linguistic views, ends in replacing action with argument (11). The book mentions ten arguments against Sufism. However, Bahjat refutes them all. He does not see any contradiction between law, Shariaa, truth and Sufi experience. He sees Shariaa as coming from God and so is the truth. He surveys most of the attacks against Sufism and takes a middle position, a position of someone who understands both views but approves totally of none. He sums up the reasons for attacking Sufism in three points:

1- Sufism is a kind of innovation never heard of from the Prophet (pbuh)

2- Sufism is a disease germinated by the Persians and Greek cultures coming abundantly under the banner of Islam and hurting its simple clarity, which comes from its nature as the religion of the mind, heart, logic and justice. It has also complicated this transparent religion by its tactics of "taste", yearning, attraction, gazing...etc.

3- Sufism started as an imitation of Christian monasticism and was later complicated by Greek philosophy, Indian mysticism and Persian paganism (10). With these strong arguments, Bahjat had to resort to the Qur'an as his sole criterion to judge the authenticity of Sufism. He admits that Sufism has not been mentioned in the Qur'an; however, the Qur'an contains a great story of those elites who are given the heavenly

knowledge; namely, the story of Moses and the ‘wali’ (generally believed to be Alkhader) (13).

Bahjat's explication of the story indicates his admission of Sufism as a metaphysical phenomenon and its religious significance: there is a special secretive knowledge coming from God and it is given only to God's friends.⁽⁵⁾ One may come to the logical conclusion that Sufism is man's different ways to try to become one of God's friends (walis). Some of the ways turn out to be right and some others turn out to be wrong, from an Islamic perspective. In between is all the difference.

To go back to Al-Aqad, he believes that Sufism can be defined according two criteria: the first is to see Sufism as a subject while the second is to see it as a phenomenon related to secular life. Sufism as a subject can be divided into two types: Sufism of the intellect and knowledge and Sufism of the heart and spirit. Sufism as a phenomenon related to the secular world is also divided into two types: the first abandons the world and the second type walks in it, and reaches the Creator through His creatures (118). The intellectual Sufi follows his mind to lead him to the utmost degree, but once that is over, he submits to the joy of faith. The all-heart Sufi seeks direct Divine knowledge through the perpetual exercise of suppressing desires because they are the obstacle between the heart and the Light. The transparent heart of this Sufi substitutes study and research (118). As for his relation to the secular world, the Sufi gives up on the world believing that it is a paint

that covers the precious essence. The second type goes into the world, tests it and lets it test him. The world, to this type, is beautiful because it is God's creation (119). Al-Aqad argues that the latter type is the closest to Islam, and that it is natural for a true Moslem to differentiate between a true essence and a fake appearance. But the Muslim Sufi resists the temptations of the world because they hide the higher truths. To Al-Aqad, this is the Sufism that Islam permits and welcomes while it refuses the sects that explain man's relation to God through concepts like 'unity of existence', union with Godhead, 'elimination of the self' (119). Foreign Sufism, Al-Aqad says, calls for all the previous concepts while true Islamic Sufism refuses them and is based on divine love and seeks uncovering the truth behind phenomena. "This Sufism is inherent in Islam, taught to the Moslem by his/her Book even if he/she has never read any Brahma or Plotinus " ; that is to say, any mystical philosophy (120)

This is fairly close to Bahjat's viewpoint. To him, Sufism has existed as a phenomenon before Islam. However, the Sufi tradition known today has a particular history. It has been suggested that Sufi thought emerged in the Middle East in the eighth century, but adherents are now found around the world. Some Sufis have also claimed that Sufism pre-dates Islam and some Sufi groups operate with only very tenuous links to Islam. Bahjat can see Islamic origins of Sufism clearly compared to all other theories. He points out that it was unknown in the time of the Prophet (PBUH) and his two successors (Abu Bakr AlSeddeeq and Omar Ibn Alkhtab) simply because people really knew their way to God

through the good example of the prophet and through the true 'jihad'⁽⁶⁾ 6. But after the assassination of Othman followed by Aly, the great split in the history of Islam took place and the Moslem world atmosphere became foggy and unclear. The grandchildren of Aly; namely Aly Zien ElAbedeen and, Mohamed Albaqer followed by Ga'afar Alsadeq unintentionally started a line of Sufism when they entirely abandoned the disgracing turmoil on the Islamic stage at their times and dedicated themselves to study and contemplation. They lived a life of austerity, humility and silence in spite of—and perhaps because of—the great religious symbols they represented. The Sufi line was taken, developed and deepened after them .

As for the linguistic origin of the word Sufism, Bahjat sees that it is as vague as the phenomenon itself. He expounds all the familiar possibilities: Sufism as coming from Suf (wool), Safaa (clarity), or from the Greek Sophia (wisdom). He mentions that Ga'afar Alsadeq wore wool underneath his silk gown striking an Islamic example as the early Moslem men were forbidden to wear silk. It took the Sufis a long time to take wool as their official attire and it was more of an attitude than an imitation of the Christian monks as it is generally said.⁽⁷⁾8

Bahjat says that asceticism, the legal father of Sufism, was suffused with fear all through the time of those grandchildren and their pupils till the time of the Sufi Amer Ibn Abdullh Ibn Qais, who took it out of the seas of fear to the seas of love, and was followed by others (Rabia'a Aladawyah is one of them). Ever since this happened, the artistic value of Sufism became more flourishing and attractive than the philosophy itself

(106). The Sufi literature has as its main subject the concept of 'love'. The Sufi literary tradition is a rich universal literature as Sayed Hassan Nasr says :

The vast literature of Sufism in all the Islamic languages...is like an ocean full of waves which move in different directions and are of different forms but always return to the primeval ground which they have originated. This monumental literature is forever fresh and timely because it is inspired. The masters of Sufism have all said the same thing throughout the ages, yet their words are different....They are like the new day, which is the same as the day before yet fresh and inspiring (18)

The Sufis see love as "the law of universe and a cause for the world to be born and a transparent tapestry revealing life's wideness and glory" (Bahjat, Seas of Love 36). Love is the inherent theme of mystic literature in general. Dr Badee M. Gomaa, says of Al-attar that he believed :

If the connection between the world and Allah is the connection between the shade and the sun or the connection between the drop and the sea of existence, so the Divine Love is the hidden force that pushes the traveler on the way of God in desire to meet the Eternal Lover: Almighty Allah. Attar and other Sufis regarded divine love as a higher state of both faith and atheism as it surpasses both of them. Love makes the lover transcendental till he vanishes (fanaa) in the Beloved (87).

Bahjat sees many similarities between the Sufi and the artist. Both have unique visions. Both live like estranged figures in their societies,

and aspire to ascend over their troubled realities by their visions. Both feed on love; however, a basic difference arises here. While the artist usually loves a human and asserts himself through love, the Sufi loves the Creator and loses himself in His Presence. (Seas of Love 73). The whole faulty argument, as Bahjat believes, is to handle the Sufi artistic literary outcome from a religious perspective .

When Sufis talk of religion, they should be judged as so; when they produce art, they should be judged as so. "It is more accurate here to discuss their artistic output as art...If they talk about Islamic dogma that is dogma ... if they try to explicate the Book, these are their trials. But if they are writing love poetry about laila or Azza, this is a great art that needs to be discussed as art" (53). The Sufi, as Bahjat argues, is an artist with a religious vision. While not every artist is a Sufi unless he/she is so competent, not every Sufi vision is related to religion; it cannot be and it shouldn't be dealt with as such (141). The Sufi elements that can be spotted in "Abraham's Birds" should be judged as art based on a religious vision, accordingly .

Bahjat confesses his childhood fascination with the Quranic versions of the animal stories together with his personal fascination with animals in general—he owns a large number of cats and is a friend of all street animals —as descendants of the holy animals of the sacred books which accompanied the prophets and were miracles in themselves. Moreover, he sees in them, later in his life, the true incarnation of truthfulness in a life that might be described as fake sometimes without guilt. To clarify this point, Sheikh Khaled Bentounes, in his book *Sufism: the Heart of*

Islam, analyzes the concern of the Sufis with the animal and natural life as an expression of their desire to be close to God:

Because of this desire, all that reminds them [The Sufis] of the Divine, that gets them closer to Him, transforms them of the Divine...They begin to hear and see more profoundly. The sound of the wind, for example, suddenly becomes a language for them; it talks! Everything talks; the noisy leaves, the running water, the singing bird (14).

The way Bahjat delineates the Qur'anic animals suggests a sacred perspective towards all creatures and a deep respect for God's infinite creative power. Bahjat used three tools to write this collection: science to explore the nature of the animals, the Qur'an to retell the parts related to the prophets, and finally his imagination to express whatever is left and to humanize their motives and voices. This artistic part, can be seen clearly as mystical, is the major concern of this paper. When you read the stories, you can hear the music of mysticism, feel its lucidity, and be dazzled by its contradictory but beautiful imagery. Most important, you can surely sense the power of love, as a creative regenerating power uniting all creatures, men or beasts, to the One and Alone.

Asked whether he considers himself a Sufi or not, Bahjat answered after a long period of silence that he liked, read about and even imitated the Sufi literary tradition. He thinks of it as the real remaining literary Islamic tradition. However, he was too afraid to claim being one of the Sufis lest that should be a kind of pretence. Oddly enough, he thought too highly of the Sufi figures to consider himself one of them (Personal

Interview). Though all literature, in the vagueness and subjectivity of its creation, is mystical, I am referring to definite mystical elements I could detect in Animals' Stories in the Qur'an especially in his story under examination "Abraham's Birds". These literary mystical elements are: the subject of the text, the style of its writing, its language and finally its imagery .

Subject

The subject matter of "Abraham's Birds" is both religious and mystical Love. To Bahjat, love is the creating force of the whole universe:

The Sufis see love as the ruling law of the universe; a reason for the birth of the universe; a tapestry through which life, in its grandeur and width, is transparent. They see that Allah has created us to bestow His love on us as a favor and to bestow on us once again the permission to love Him. (Seas of Love 36)

In another book, Allah Fi Alakeedah Alislamiyah: Resalah Gadeedah Fi Altawheed (Allah in the Islamic Creed: a New Message of Monotheism), Bahjat adopts the same point of view as his own affirming the amazing realization that Almighty God has loved his creatures before He had created them:

Why does God want us to love him unless He, Glorified is His name, is ahead in loving us? No one asks anyone to love him/her unless he/she loves them first. Measure that to a Creator who

has the favor of creating as a start, making things exist, bestowing, and resurrection at an end (314)

Similarly, Sheikh Khaled Bentounes stresses the same idea :

Those who are on the spiritual quest must have no presumptions of their own. When they take the path they must simply do what it takes of them ...but they must, of course, desire Him. In fact, is it not He who desired us before we do Him? Who has desired first? (16)

Moreover, Bahjat believes, after Jalaludden Rumi, that man's pains are various in this world, but the most important and dangerous of them is the pain of separation from God. The only way to overcome man's alienation and suffering in this world is to adopt love as a cure, philosophy and a method (Allah 321). In addition to this, in his novella, *The Prince and the Dervish*, Bahjat quotes Jalaludden Rumi's paradoxical definition of love, "They ask, what love is? It is abandoning the will. Whoever cannot give up his will has none. The lover is a king with the world under his feet. The king never looks under his feet" (48). In fact, Almighty Allah has mentioned the very word 'love' in describing His relation to the believers as so many verses of the Holy Book reveal, and as Bahjat has surely discovered

"But do Good;
For God loveth those
Who do good".
(S.II:195)

The word 'love' has been mentioned in other places as well. "But those of faith are overflowing in their love for God" (S. II: 165). But what is 'love' to Ahmad Bahjat, to begin with? Asked about love, he kept trying to avoid giving a straight definition during the interview. He saw it as too simple and too self-clear to be defined. Finally, he said, "Love is the reason of creation. Almighty Allah never benefits from the believers' worship nor is He hurt of the disbelievers' denial. Hadn't He loved his slaves, He would not have created them" (Bahjat, Interview).

Hence, Bahjat is clearly influenced by the way the Sufis see God, themselves and the world. The approach he adopted in writing the stories is Sufi in nature. He does not tell their stories; rather, he 'is' the stories.

I was determined from the beginning to write this animal collection from the viewpoint of the animals themselves; in the style of diaries. I meant to borrow their minds, instincts, dreams, and sorrows to write their diaries inspired in doing that by Van Gogh when he said: "when I paint a flower, I become the flower" (ASQ 12).

The flower in Van Gogh's saying and the animal in Bahjat's story do not much differ from the object of love in the Sufi saying. The entire phenomenal world is an imperfect reflection of the 'beauty of the absolute'. In contemplating the shadow, we can get a faint glimpse of the Origin. In fact, contemplating the shadow becomes a necessary step to reach out for the 'absolute'⁽⁸⁾

The outset of writing the collection was puzzling to Bahjat: he had a writer's block. He retreated to one of his regional friends for a considerable period of time and dedicated his time to reading about the

animal kingdom. For a long time, he accumulated information, but could not start writing. Suddenly, the stories were telling themselves to him in no effort. Then, the breath of heavenly mercy blew over him, as he says, and made everything easy:

The rocks, up there on the tops of mountains over which Solomon's Hoopoe passed melted and told me his story. The sounds made by The Cave Men's Dog echoed and their waves became deep night symbols retelling me his story, and a shell, thrown out of the deep sea, whispered to me that it had witnessed the glorious repentance festivity by Jonah inside the whale (ASQ 12).

This idea of mechanical writing as if dictated by someone else is mystic in nature. I find this as a sign of Bahjat's personal Sufi tendencies. Bahjat himself quotes Nicholson as describing mystical writing as 'mechanical writing' (Seas of Love 142). Bahjat admits that writing that collection was one of the happiest periods of his whole life (Bahjat, Interview). Analyzing the passage in which Bahjat describes the process of writing one finds out that 1) the passage signifies a unity between past and present, here and there, the human and the non-human which is clearly mystical. It is as if Bahjat, together with the whole universe have become one in contemplating the power and beauty of the One. This mysterious oneness has uncovered the secrets of the whole universe to the writer and made it possible for him to identify with the animals he is writing about. This unity and this identification are typical of mystical experiences. 2) The passage also is an application of what Bahjat himself

writes of the Sufis: " The Sufis say about themselves that they are people of states (ahwal) not sayings (aqwal)" (Bahjat, Seas 142). What the sentence says about the Sufis is stressing the importance and primacy of the Sufi state – love - over the product - literature. Sufi literature is an unconscious self-produced art like the smell of a flower. This spontaneity, Bahjat argues, is what makes the Sufi art an incomparable literary tradition (142)

The main theme of "Abraham's Birds" is love: the love that the male dove has for God, the love that it has for Abraham, the love that it carries for the air which is described as pure joy, and finally the love that fills its heart towards his 'Nasha:'

A white dove that called itself Nasha. It had another name before falling in love. Doves change their names when they love. The old name becomes insufficient to signify the new self that is created after love. We know that a new self is born after love. We know all the secrets of love. We love our Creator who created us out of nothingness. Three quarters of love we give to Allah. And we love the air that carries us just as it carries music. Half of the left quarter we give to the air. We love man, thus we feed him our flesh with no pain. Quarter of the left quarter we give to man. An amount as little as a grain of wheat is left for the females. Man thinks that it is little and throws it away, while all the golden fields of grain that feed millions of people were germinated from one grain. (ASQ, 38-39)

These are the first words by the narrator of the story; the male dove whose look at the universe is that of a Sufi. It is significant that 'he' is never given a name. Many of the animals of the collection are given names but not this one. Out of complete self-denial, he only names those he loves: Allah, Abraham and Nasha. In another place he says "Thank God I was created a bird. I do not know how earthly creatures bear their lives on earth. There are a thousand joys in flight that only those who rise can enjoy" (38). This strikes a similarity that Bahjat sees between Sufis and birds. He likens the Sufi look to that of an artist on the one side, and to that of a bird on the other:

There is a difference between the artistic view and the ordinary view of things. It is the same difference between the bird and the worm...Both are Allah's creatures but the bird is able to fly and roam the sky and able to see a bigger distance than the worm. (Seas, 136)

Therefore, Bahjat concludes that the Sufi outlook is achieved when man exercises a bird-like look at life; that is to say when he can see a larger part instead of his imprisonment inside the narrow focus, the worm-like scope of things. The bird and the Sufi are unique. What I mean here is that we are in front of a special bird, an artist, a lover, a mystic. He is loving, tender, apprehensive, and undemanding (he loves Nasha, the little skinny dove left behind by everyone.) He is also a great watcher (he watches Abraham and notices that he is a wise special generous man whose house is hospitable towards men, birds and even ants). Loving God and one's fellows, irrespective of their race, religion or

nationality, and without consideration for any possible reward, is the key to ascension according to Sufis. We saw the male dove, as humanized and represented by Bahjat, adopting the same ideas. This, of course, reflects Bahjat's own view of the world.

However, the kind of mysticism explored in the story is not the type that seeks communion with God through practicing a series of devotional practices leading to higher levels of ecstatic consciousness pictured as an absorption into God Himself. It is of the other type that seeks heavenly grace through self-sacrifice. That is what M. Elshaer alludes to in his unpublished PhD thesis *Mysticism in Kathleen Raine's Poetry*,

Mystical union of love or the unifying vision are mainly divided into two categories found in any religion or creed in varying degrees of prevalence: a) an undifferentiated identification, b) a transformation of the soul in the Divine which retains the distinction between the two ... In the second category, the union is interpreted as the eradication of man's will in God's will by grace (338).

As a rule, the history of all religions and creeds records many signs of human sacrifice for the love of the Divine Ideal. Abraham's story is one of the sharpest examples in the Qur'an. In the story of the birds, Abraham slays the birds commanded in doing that by God to assure his heart about life, death and resurrection. The story ends with Abraham's heart rested. Later in his life, as is well-known and assured by this deep faith, Abraham was ready to slay his own son in obedience to the Almighty

Will. Abraham is a unique figure among the prophets. He was the only Prophet to be God's friend; ' Khaleel:

"Who can be better
In religion than one
Who submits his whole self
To God, does good,
And follows the way
Of Abraham the true in faith?
For God did take
Abraham for a friend (S. IV.125).

In God's Prophets, Bahjat contemplates Abraham's status as God's friend and realizes in it an unequal honor. Bahjat holds friendship to be a great level of love (79). He believes that the greatest goal of any traveler on God's road is 'to love God.' However, it is beyond one's imagination to be loved and befriended by God (80). Elshaer contemplates the idea of the journey on God's road, and explains it as a concentration of one's entire spiritual powers. It is a continuous immersion in charitable life. The term charity is a synonym of 'love' as Elshaer notices in the usages of the word in the old and modern translations of the Bible and in the Qur'an (17-19). Abraham has been described as a charitable man (Mohsen) by the bird; moreover as God's friend, he proved worth of this precious love when he completely submitted to God's will as to slaughter his son (the one he had craved all his life and had got as an old man). Bahjat contemplates the Qur'anic verse describing Abraham and Ishmael's attitude at the moment of slaughter.

"So when they had both
Submitted their wills (to God),
And he had laid him
Prostrate on his forehead
We called out to him,
O Abraham!
Thou hast already fulfilled
The Vision!—thus indeed
Do we reward
Those who do right .
For this was obviously
A trial—
And we ransomed him
With a momentous sacrifice"(S.XXXVII.103-107)

Bahjat comments on this by analyzing the word 'Aslama' or 'surrendered' seeing in the meaning of the word the whole core of this religion: 'complete surrender to God's will.' The same definition was given to the researcher of the word 'love'. "What is love? To give away all yourself so that nothing is left." Logically, then, 'Islam' and 'Love' are more or less the same. One can safely say that Bahjat believes that Sufism—in the particular sense of being a complete surrender to God's will—is the real core of Islam .

This is reincarnated in the story of Abraham's birds. Bahjat strikes the parallel between the birds, slain by Abraham, and Ishmael's future expected slaying; both deep acts of sacrifice and evidence to mystic love.

This parallel is meant in the story and even hinted at by the protagonist bird which submits to Allah's will while being slain:

My wife was lying down beside the youngsters. I was sitting outside our nest when Lord Abraham reached out and took me. I submitted to the kind hand. In his second hand was a knife. I started to watch the reflection of the sun on the blue blade. Thousands of suns emanate to the edge and are born on it. The razor comes closer to me and I become more submissive. (ASQ, 47)

The artistic bird's spontaneous submission in the slaughter episode, as he diverts his own attention to the sun, foreshadows the submission of Abraham to God's will in the future; both deep mystical acts. The image of the thousand suns being born on the knife is a connotation of the light of truth; "The Light" which is Allah. In the time of death, he remembers the Divine and reveals his own mystical melting in the One. The mystic's experience, as explained so far, is a continuous denial of one's own will and a continuous ardent trial to dissolve the human will into the Divine will in order to realize the final Godly assurance. The passage takes us to Jalaludden Rumi's poem "The Allure of Love ":

Someone who does not run
Toward the allure of love walks
A road where nothing lives.
But this dove here senses
The love hawk floating above
And waits and will not be driven

Or scared to safety. Barks (49)

The killing hawk here is equal to the knife; both destructive though still in the name of Love. The dove, as a harmonious part relating to the One, accepts what may come as natural and logical. It is amazing that Bahjat uses a similar hawk illusion in the story when the bird totally loses direction in flight and falls in a hawk's nest. Scared, the dove flies back as if chased by a thousand hawks only to go back to his real slaughter at the hands of Abraham. For the dove, though unable to understand the wisdom of being slain and then resurrected, the mystical love he knows and experiences by pure instinct is the divine power transmitting the mortal into the immortal. Thus, for Bahjat, as for mystics, love is the vehicle by which he is able to ascend to the Divine. This is the only path to conceive God's wisdom in life and death.

The dove also surprises us by saying that doves symbolize resurrection of the dead. And as if he realizes that we might be surprised by the idea, he explains it:

Only those who know love can understand the resurrection of the dead. Love itself is a resurrection from the death of habit, the boredom of familiarity and the absence of meaning. How can a creature believe in love but deny resurrection of the body? In love, there is a moment where the ONE calls his slaves and so they rise out of the dust of sleep .(40-41)

Though doves traditionally symbolize peace and loyalty, new Qur'anic mythical connotations are added in this story: resurrection. The power of Love is the real creative force behind creation, destruction and

resurrection. The clear wisdom and spontaneous logic of the dove make the matter surprisingly simple and mystic at the same time. In fact, love is the heart of mysticism in any creed as Elshaer says,

There is a universal agreement that the quintessence of mystical experience is the realization of an ecstatic union between the human soul and the Divine. Striking also is the mystic's unanimous glorification of the primacy and subtlety of the role of love in attaining this union, (338).

Death is a typical Sufi subject. The Sufis do not regard death as a sad end to a happy life; it is not an eradication but an introduction to an eternal life. Rather, it is the start of a bigger ascension in the Creator's ladder. The Sufis do not perceive death as an eradication of the self; rather, a melting in the Divine Self, which is the ultimate goal of the Sufi. So, when the ordinary person flees death, the Sufi welcomes it. Hence, the Sufis vaguely say 'Die before you die'. By death the Sufis mean the death of the desire in life, in creatures, in the entire humanity, in anything but Allah (Bahjat, Seas 153). The mystic's experience is a continuous negation of his own will and of all that is not God in order that he may, if God wills, realize the affirmation of the Eternal Truth. So, this dove, in a fascinating tale, summarizes the weighty philosophy of the great mystic philosophers .

Style

The style of writing the story is subjective and immediate in a way that suggests mysticism. The different moods of the bird are vividly

described to the point of bringing tears to the reader's eyes. The feelings of blessedness and joyfulness can clearly be sensed in the scenes of flight and bird love. "I was heading the flock. I unfolded my wings, raised my beak and went. The flock followed me. I moved my wings and started to swing. It is as if the air is pure joy. I am swimming in pure joy (38).

Likewise, the scenes of bird love convey a deep sense of unity with the entire universe. Before consummating their love in the act of marriage, the two lover birds go to receive Abraham's blessings:

We landed in front of him and kissed his feet. Our hearts trembled with love. He reached out his blessed hands and patted our heads. My sweetheart covered and we flew. Of me she covered again and we flew. And we flew. We celebrated our wedding in the air. We invited the clouds, the stars hidden in the sun; the sun and the moon hidden in its light; we invited all the great creatures of God to our wedding. Pure joy is the air .(46)

In the scenes related to the bird's observation of Abraham, feelings of comfort, peacefulness, deep respect and submission are sensed:

I am still flying, going back to her, Nasha. At first I will dip my beak in the water that Abraham offers us. I lower my wings to the name of Abraham. He is the owner of our house and the house of Allah, the perpetual traveler to Allah, the friend of Allah. Oh, how I love him! It is impossible for creatures to come near Abraham and not to be touched; the first man whose heart established the laws of the oneness of Love. He set fire on his own blessed body to enlighten all creatures (41).

By its Qur'anic connotation, the expression "lower my wing" takes us immediately to how God pictures the attitude of a decent son towards his parents,

And, out of kindness,
Lower to them the wing
Of humility, and say:
'My Lord! Bestow on them
Thy Mercy even as they
Cherished me in childhood. (S.xvii.24)

The holy verse uses the metaphor of the son as a bird that lowers its wing out of respect for his parents. The actual bird in the story uses the same metaphor in relation to Abraham. However, in the story, it ceases to be a metaphor in the sense that the bird has literal wings that can be lowered. It is still a metaphor in the sense that the bird takes Abraham as his father. Another way of seeing it is to think of Abraham and the protagonist dove as bound together like a Sufi master and his disciple.

In contrast to these scenes of happiness and rest, a sense of deep grief and heart-breaking loss cannot be missed in the scenes of mourning over the dove's father or in Nasha's sadness over his slaughter:

When my mother sickened and died, something vaguely terrible and awesome touched my father...when they carried her away of his sight, he lowered his head to the ground and said nothing. On the first day, he was silent; no flight, no food, no water. He would open and close his beak as if about to say something. On the second day, he lay on his stomach silently...On the third day he lay on his side and sighed, he looked as if

he was carrying a mountain over its chest. On the fourth day he inserted its beak in his wing and died. When they carried him from our sight his wing was wet as if it cried after it died (40).

Using the technique of dreams in the story is also typical of Sufi writing. Dreams are highly significant for the Sufi tradition. They are like windows to the truth; messages from the eternal. The protagonist dove has a dream of his own slaughter in which he sees, oddly enough, Nasha, torn up and bleeding on a white cloud. The dream foreshadows the slaughter and prepares both the bird and the reader for the loss.

Language

Sufi writing makes extensive use of parable, allegory, and metaphor. It is held by Sufis that meaning can only be reached through a long and painful process of seeking the truth, and knowledge of oneself. Because mystic language usually contains images of different attitudes and spiritual states of the soul in its quest of the divine love, the language is full of the vagueness and paradoxicality of what it strives to express. Often, it uses the secular love expressions and images to attempt expressing their love for the One. First, in his first meeting with Nasha, the protagonist bird kept flapping his wings around her, folding and unfolding his wings around her, circling with his body around her. Not one word was spoken but he says that he was "talking to her in the language of silence which says much more than words" (42). The flapping and the circling around Nasha takes the reader directly to the whirling dance of the initiates in the 'Mevlevi Order.. This is a Sufi order

founded by the followers of Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi. They are also known as the 'Whirling Dervishes' due to their famous practice of whirling as a form of dhikr (remembrance of Allah). Dervish is a common term for an initiate of the Sufi Path. The dove's practice takes place right at the beginning when the protagonist dove is still novice on the Sufi path.

The sentence "I do not know" and "how?" recur in "Abraham's Birds" when the situation pertains to the mysterious power of love or to the mystery of resurrection. "In fact, in love 'I do not know' is a recurrent theme. What a person really knows is the picture he paints within himself for the beloved, while Allah alone knows the truth" (51). Love and resurrection, to Bahjat, are equally mysterious and awesome. They come from one origin and have the same effects. So, when the resurrection takes place, the two birds keep trembling for hours trying to understand 'how' but that is beyond anyone's rational mind, not even Abraham, the friend of Allah:

‘How

'How' stretched in front of us like an endless secret Maybe the friend of Allah wanted to see the Creative Hand at work but the secret was sealed while the result was revealed. Oh my Lord! But how? 'How' returned to float on the surface of the water " (48).

The connotation of the word 'water' is equally significant. To Bahjat it always relates to the genesis of the universe when Allah created every living thing of water, and He throve on His Throne above the water. The

sea is a vast indescribable phenomenon, after all. To Bahjat, water is a symbol for the miraculous mystery of the Divine:

The literature on mysticism of almost all creeds is indeed full of adjectives like, 'indescribable', 'incommunicable'; inexpressible, 'unspeakable. The mystic sometimes employs such expressions metaphorically...but in most cases, they are used literally out of the realization that the depth of the experience far surpasses the limitations of the language. (ElShaer 65)

This bottomless world of puzzles resembles in essence the sinking of the soul in the Divine darkness which in reality is Absolute Light. "Symbols and myths utilized in mystical writings tend to revolve round one focal point; the relationship of the soul with the invisible (e.g. God as its source) and with the visible e.g. world of generation and the body (Elshaer 67).

Second, the dove plays with the word "half" from the beginning to the end of the story to reflect the separation one suffers away from Love, or God. At the beginning of the story, he says, "A dove carries half of its home in its heart while the second half is in the heart of the beloved" (38). Right at the climatic point before the slaughter, the dove has a dream where he sees Nasha slain and torn up into halves," I was dreaming that I was flying and at the same time could see myself torn apart with her on the mountaintops; half of my left side sticking to half of her right side, each of us completing the other" (44). Then, after the slaughter, Nasha stands still for hours crying over "half of my body" (48). The repetition of the word 'half' deepens the sense of separation and

multitude in a way that makes the unity at the end of the story both strong and heart assuring.

Third, the story is told in the present tense which brings both immediacy and a firm conviction of what the bird sees and experiences as perpetual reality. This takes the reader back to the mystical experience which is always recorded as subjective and timeless.

Imagery

Certain images are repetitive in the story. The images of rebirth and resurrection are always there related to love: bird love that creates a new self or Divine Love that creates the whole universe. Rumi writes in 'Love in Absence'.

" When men and women become one, Thou art that One/When the units are wiped out, Lo, Thou art that unity" (Reynolds 33). The reader sees this influence clearly in the image of the abounding doves in Abraham's courtyard, "We were four doves taking Abraham's house as ours. Then, we became ten doves, then twenty. Love was expressing itself in thousands of ways causing the youngsters to increase in number " (46).

To Bahjat, all creatures and all phenomena are individualized modes of the Real Being which is Allah; when stripped of their individuality, they become one with each other and with the real being. That is to say, God reveals Himself in every union of loving souls. He is the ultimate Unity of the whole universe as the image signifies. This is a straight reflection of Ibn Arabi's ideas that indicates the love of females and the

physical union with them as a real possibility of true mystical insight. This entirely new perspective on the meaning of sexuality springs not out of lust but, out of the Sufi understanding of the value of women. "Ibn Arabi's philosophy is monistic, holding to the essential unity of all being; all existing things emerged from the 'marriage' of the divine spirit, which is male, with Nature, which is female" (Hoffeman 235).

The imagery of light and fire are recurrent Sufi imagery. Notice this poem for Rumi:

Like Light over this plain
A candle, as it diminishes
Explains, gathering more and more is
Not the way. Run, become light and heat and help. Melt.
Barks 64

Or this second poem for Rumi:
Never, in sooth, does the lover seek without being sought
By his beloved
When the lighting of love has shot into this heart, know
That there is love in that heart.
When love of God waxes in thy heart, beyond any doubt
God hath love for thee.

Reynolds 122

The imagery of light and fire likened to the Absolute Light is not a Sufi invention. In fact this imagery is typically Qur'anic .

God is the Light
Of the heavens and the earth

The parable of His Light
Is as if there were a Niche
And within it a Lamp:
The Lamp enclosed in Glass:
The glass as it were
A brilliant Star
Lit from a blessed Tree
An Olive, neither of the East
Nor the West,
Whose Oil is well-nigh?
Luminous,
Though Fire scarce touched it:
Light upon Light
God doth guide
Whom He will
To His Light (S.xxiv35-36)

The images of fire again take the to the duality of love/resurrection in the story of Prophet Abraham. The Great fire set for Abraham is a kind of resurrection. He is reborn inside; more assured of the uniqueness of his relation to the Creator; better aware of his responsibility towards the Holy message. The dove reminisces about Abraham and the great fire saying that he is:

The first man whose heart laid the laws of the unity of love. He set fire on his reverend body like a candle to enlighten the creatures. His enemies threw him in fire, but the fire of earth was put out by the fire of heaven

that was burning in his heart. Fire cannot burn a stronger fire. Nothing is greater than the Fire of Love. Nasha .(41)

It is amazing that once the bird mentions the fire of celestial love, his mind is instantly turned into Nasha for this earthly fiery love is one flame of the great fire of God's love.

“Abraham's Birds” starts with love and ends with love as well. The last words of the protagonist bird are a message of love. After they reach the conclusion that there has been an unfathomable miracle of resurrection, the two doves reach the conclusion that God loves both of them deeply. Asking about the fabulous power that can summon the dead back to life, the protagonist bird is answered by Nasha:

It is the power of love. Have you forgotten that Abraham is the friend of God? I have become more confused. What is the wisdom behind all this?

Nasha said," I have no answer, dear. My love, All I know is that Allah assured Abraham's heart when he needed assurance. He also assured my heart by bringing you back to me After I had lost you....I said, " ?Allah really loves Abraham!

Allah loves you and me!" Nasha Said (49)”.

Love is the inspiring spirit which provides Bahjat with an inexhaustible source of images and symbols to enrich his fiction. The primacy and the subtlety of love as represented in the love scenes of the protagonist dove/Nasha, the protagonist dove/Abraham, and Abraham/Allah should be seen together because they all juxtapose and emphasize each other. They work as a chain of reflections that show the

same idea in various images. The way to read the story is to apprehend it through a mystical approach; but even when you approach it as a simple story; you will be marvelously touched by the vigorousness with which the theme is fulfilled. One idea becomes unmistakably clear at the end of the story: through his faith in the eternal, man seeks love of the divine whose omnipotence and will are fulfilled in the maximum sacrificial act of man. In doing so willingly, man proves his boundless love for the divine, and in return, he is granted the eternal love of the divine.

Conclusion

So, one can conclude that Bahjat could marvelously weave a beautiful story out of the Qur'anic reference to the slain birds. He could personify the doves and humanize their motives ringing many bells: love as a creating force, love as similar to resurrection; the Sufi outlook is like an artist or bird, love and resurrection are mysterious phenomena that should be lived but not questioned.

Love in Abraham's Birds, as in many other mystical literary traditions of different creeds, is the sovereign alchemy. The lovers live in each other's hearts in Bahjat's world so that no matter how far they seem, they are always together. To quote Rumi to the very end from his poem "Moses and the Shepherd", "Lovers don't finally meet somewhere/they're in each other all along" (Reynolds 169).

Notes

- (1) The quotations taken from the Arabic books are all translated by the researcher.
- (2) The verse says: " To God belong the East
And the West: whithersoever
Ye turn, there is the Presence
Of God. For God is
All-Pervading,
All-knowing."
(S.II.115)
- (3) I was not convinced to use the pronoun 'it' as the bird is totally humanized in the story. Also, using 'it' would have created serious vagueness in translating the love scenes between the bird and Nasha. The only solution was to use the pronoun 'he'.
- (4) The verse says: " He knoweth
What (appearth to His creatures
As) Before or After
Or Behind the.
Nor Shall they compass
Aught of His knowledge."
(S.II.255)
- (5) The verse says in describing Alkhadr " So they found one of/Our
Servants/ On whom we had bestowed/Mercy from Ourselves/And

whom we had taught/ Knowledge from our own/Presence." (S. xviii.65)

- (6) Al-Mawrid Dictionary gives the following meanings of the word 'jihad': a) a holy war waged to support Islam, b) a campaign or war for the sake of a principal or religion. Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary gives a rather narrow meaning of the word: holy war fought by Muslims against those who reject Islam. It is known, however, from the Holy Qur'an that the word is wider in meaning to include many types of secular struggle of which is the war with the enemies or struggling the desires of the self.
- (7) It was a reaction against the luxury of the Omawayd dynasty that took the silk, embroidered with gold and silver, as their official attire. The grandchildren of Aly Ibn Alhussien Ibn Aly took the wool, generally thick, rough, and cheap at that time, as their attire in a kind of passive resistance to the corrupt society.
- (8) This resembles the following metaphor, credited to an unknown Sufi scholar which helps to describe this line of thought." There are three ways of knowing a thing. Take for instance a flame. One can be told of the flame, one can see the flame with his own eyes, and finally one can reach out and be burned by it. In this way, we Sufis seek to be burned by God." (Anonymous quoted in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sufism>)

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